TANG JIU QING
BALLAD of SWORD & WINE
6
QIANG JIN JIU

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Chapter 186:
Blizzard

THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN sky and the earth was erased as the blizzard roared across the battlegrounds and engulfed the eastern range of the Hongyan Mountains. The world was a boundless expanse of white snow as far as the eye could see.

Hassen had left the battlefield, but the snowstorm was blinding. Worried he'd lose his bearings in the snowfields overnight, he retreated to the abandoned relay station. The Scorpions Hassen was leading all possessed features similar to the people of Great Zhou. As soon as they returned, they had shed the Libei cavalry armor they'd worn as a disguise and were now sitting around drinking tea.

"Zhou…" One of the Scorpions wiped the token attached to his stolen armor and squinted at the text in the glow of the fire. "This one was surnamed Zhou, huh?"

"Mine's Fu." Another man raised a token. "It's a man from the Libei homeland."

"Wolves all hail from the Libei homeland." Ulihan, a bearded man with a scar over one cheek, looked around at the younger men joking with each other, then at Hassen, who'd been silent throughout. "You slew the king of wolves tonight. Hassen, from now on, you are the king of the northern battlefields."

The northern battlefields had always belonged to the king of wolves. Xiao Fangxu occupied the highest peak of the Hongyan Mountains with his

valor and military prowess. For the last twenty years, the mere mention of this man had struck fear into the hearts of the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. Everyone here was acutely familiar with the legends surrounding him. Yet tonight, they had returned victorious, and the man they had slain was no ordinary mortal, but the war god of Libei.

Hassen sipped his tea and smiled shyly at Ulihan.

He had always possessed an understated intelligence, but after tonight, no one would dare belittle him. Ulihan could already see how fast Biansha would raze Libei in the coming years. Their commanders understood the present Libei all too well: Xiao Jiming had yet to recover from his injuries, and Xiao Chiye was but a fledgling. Libei had a dearth of commanding generals and was facing a bitterly cold winter. Hassen had been waiting for this moment a very long time.

“But you don’t look happy,” Ulihan observed.

“Not quite what I expected.” Hassen cradled the bowl in his hands and recalled his war trophy. “I grew up listening to legends of him. My father always said he was invincible.”

“The esuhuri will be proud of you.” Ulihan thought for a moment. “What you have severed tonight is also the head of the Libei Armored Cavalry.”

Hassen drank his tea and didn’t answer. But Ulihan was right. It wasn’t just Xiao Fangxu’s, but an army’s head Hassen had removed this night. All along, the iron wall standing in the north had seemed indestructible. Yet when Hassen stood before it at last, he’d found there was a fatal chink in the Libei Armored Cavalry’s armor.

This army was far too centralized. Although their faith was rooted in the land they stood on, they were overly reliant on their commander. They were still too new; every single soldier had his eyes locked on Xiao Fangxu. As long as Xiao Fangxu was there, the troops thought, the Libei Armored Cavalry would ride triumphant out of every battle.

Amur understood this, and so did Hassen. Since the start of the reign of Tianchen, the Libei Armored Cavalry had begun to lose the initiative. Xiao Jiming's temporary defeat was the first sign of their collapse. As soon as Xiao Fangxu stepped back onto the field, Hassen was certain the Libei Armored Cavalry's leadership was also the key to taking them down. Hassen had been transferred north specifically to familiarize himself with Xiao Fangxu. He had followed Amur in his battles all over the land since he was eight years old, and the name spoken most in the commander's tent had always been Xiao Fangxu's. At a time when Xiao Fangxu still knew nothing of him, he had already learned everything there was to know about the king wolf.

Hassen didn't want to win just one battle. He wanted to topple Libei on every front. As to who would be grief-stricken over this, it was not his to consider—just as Libei had never considered Biansha's suffering. Hassen wanted to crush his opponent to blood and dust. He wanted to pierce his opponent's heart so thoroughly they would never recover from the setback. The time for Biansha to turn the tables was now. The two parties had been at odds too long, sharpening their fangs and accumulating debts of blood. Compassion for their enemy was tantamount to suicide.

As the fire burned down to embers, the Scorpions scattered, looking for a corner in which to rest. Leaving Ulihan the night watch, Hassen leaned against an old cabinet and closed his eyes.

The frigid wind howled over the eaves, sending the wind chimes hanging at the relay station's entrance clanking violently. All color had drained from the world, leaving only black and white as the night and snow tore into each other. Snowflakes like tattered wads of cotton piled up into snow dunes, and the footprints the men had left in the snow were soon swallowed up.

A Scorpion standing outside the relay station to piss was grabbed by the throat before he could untie his pants. A muffled *crack* followed, and the Scorpion's body was lowered slowly to the ground.

Ulihan had an acute sense of hearing. Immediately, his hand went to his iron hammer. He stared menacingly at the doorway and whispered, "The wolf has come."

The Scorpion closest to the entrance shifted silently to peek through the crack between the doors. The moment he bent over, a long blade plunged through the gap and straight through his head.

No one in the relay station made a sound. Hassen watched calmly as that blade withdrew, splashing the door with crimson. The stench of blood filled the air. The door flew open, and a gust of wind extinguished the fire and plunged the house into darkness. A figure bearing a striking resemblance to Xiao Fangxu loomed in the doorway. Ulihan broke out in a cold sweat.

For a suspended moment, all was silent. Then the Scorpions burst into action. Nearly half their number had perished during their ambush on Xiao Fangxu, and those that remained were exhausted. Now again they felt the fear of being run through by the king of wolves. The Scorpions prayed this wolf pup didn't have the same arm strength as his father.

Yet every man who rushed forward was nailed to the floor.

A dark figure blocked the sliver of light peeking from the entrance. Hot, viscous blood splattered onto their faces. Ulihan didn't wipe it off. In the darkness, he swung his hammer toward Xiao Chiye's face the same way he had swung it at Xiao Fangxu's.

Xiao Chiye blocked Ulihan's forearm, stopping him mid-swing. Surrounded on all sides, he didn't try to bring up his blade as he freed it from the corpse below him, but merely smashed the carved demonhead on the hilt up into Ulihan's face. Ulihan tried to back up, but Xiao Chiye didn't release his grip. A Scorpion behind him grabbed Wolfsfang. Xiao Chiye let the blade fall and punched Ulihan to the ground with his bare fist.

Ulihan's muscular body crashed into the remains of the fire, knocking it over. His face was drenched in blood; he could feel the bridge of his nose was broken. He shook his head. His ears were ringing from the impact of Xiao Chiye's powerful strike, and his vision swam. He spat out a tooth knocked loose by the blow and mumbled thickly, "Kill him!"

Hassen sensed a pair of eyes locked on him. From the moment the door opened, he'd felt the intensity of that gaze. Hassen knew what Xiao Chiye had come for. But he wouldn't return it; it was a trophy he was determined to keep.

He gripped his pike dagger, but Xiao Chiye didn't give him the opportunity to use it. He lifted a Scorpion from the ground and held the man up before him as a shield, using that sturdy human body to slam Hassen against the cabinet. Xiao Chiye's next punch missed his target, and the cabinet door burst apart. The cabinet collapsed with a loud crash, giving Hassen a moment to catch his breath.

The next strike of his pike dagger was swift and fierce, but Xiao Chiye didn’t dodge. He grasped the blade and wrenched it toward himself.

Hassen had experienced Xiao Chiye’s strength back in Tudalung Banner. He knew the dagger was as good as gone; he abandoned it and bent at the waist to dodge Xiao Chiye’s next blow.

Xiao Chiye held tight to the dagger as Ulihan pounced on him from the side. That mountainous body slammed Xiao Chiye against the wall, and Ulihan paid him back with a heavy punch. His fist smashed into Xiao Chiye like a brick. Mouth filling with blood, Xiao Chiye grabbed Ulihan’s collar. He turned his head aside to dodge the next blow and slammed his head into Ulihan’s injured nose.

Ulihan’s hand flew up to cover his face, and Xiao Chiye flipped the dagger in his hand. Keeping the sharp tip of the blade between his fingers, he slammed a fist into Ulihan’s face before he could move out of the way.

The man let out a howl of fury as the dagger embedded itself in his right eye. Blood poured from his face as he bent over, convulsing in pain, and cursed in the Biansha tongue.

But Xiao Chiye was still moving. He yanked Ulihan up by the hair and lunged forward to slam Ulihan’s head against the wall. There was a sickening *thud*, then another, until the wall was awash in blood. Another Scorpion threw his arms around Xiao Chiye’s waist and crouched to flip him over, but Xiao Chiye didn’t budge. He felt around for the scimitar on the Scorpion’s side and released his grip on Ulihan.

Ulihan cried out in pain and stumbled away. He’d made it only two steps when he felt a coolness on his neck. Before he could register what was

happening, his blood spurted like a fountain, and his head tumbled from his shoulders.

Nose filled with the metallic stench of blood, Xiao Chiye wiped his face, revealing a pair of gleaming eyes in the darkness, brimming with insanity and hatred. He looked like a ravenous wolf—one whose sense of reason had been completely engulfed by the heavy snow. He stared at Hassen and said, each word deliberate: “Give my father back to me.”

Hassen brushed back the red hair in front of his eyes. His voice was cold and detached as he said, “Then will your father give my brother back to me?”

Xiao Chiye wasn’t interested in hearing this man speak. He sprang at him, and the two crashed through the window and rolled into the snowstorm.

Hassen struck back with all his might. He knocked Xiao Chiye down into the snow, then nimbly danced back as he gasped for breath. Tone frosty, he said, “Your father’s armored hooves trampled my brother’s head to a pulp in a blizzard just like this one. He left his corpse to rot in the wilderness.”

Xiao Chiye scrambled to his feet and spat bloody froth into the snow.

A fresh pike dagger twirled between Hassen’s fingers. He traced one finger along the cold gleam of the blade and said expressionlessly, “I’m merely returning the favor—an eye for an eye.”

They collided once more. The wind flung snow into their stinging eyes, and their gasping breaths were as guttural as the gale; the world itself seemed to be howling. Xiao Chiye locked his hands around Hassen’s throat and hoisted him into the air, smashing his back against the damaged wall of the relay station. The impact jolted flakes of snow off the wall. Hassen grabbed Xiao Chiye’s right arm and twisted with all his might, nearly breaking it.

Xiao Chiye's right hand, still damaged from his first battle with Hassen, went numb. He lost his grip, and Hassen broke away. In the next instant, the remaining Scorpions dove for Xiao Chiye's legs, and he went tumbling face-first into the snow. Hassen seized his chance—he stabbed the pike dagger down on the back of Xiao Chiye's neck. At the last moment, Xiao Chiye shoved off the ground with his elbow and took the blade in his left shoulder instead.

Hassen was still trying to pull the dagger out when Xiao Chiye reached around and grabbed the back of Hassen's head. He slammed it against the ground with terrifying force and held it firmly in place in the snow. Blood stained his shoulder. The dagger, still fixed in place, rose and fell with each of his rasping breaths.

Both of Hassen's palms were pressed against the snowy ground. A hoarse roar escaped him, but he couldn't lift his head. Xiao Chiye was as immovable as stone.

Xiao Chiye tightened his grip on Hassen's red hair, his eyes bloodshot as he bellowed, "*Give him back to me!*"

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Chapter 187:
Approach

HASSEN PANTED in the snow. His cheek stung where the ice of the snowfield scraped it, and the nape of his neck was flushed from strain. As the howl of the wind at Xiao Chiye's back intensified, an iron hammer swung out of the blizzard and knocked him down. Seizing his chance, Hassen climbed to his feet and spat out a mouthful of ice.

The Scorpions had suffered heavy losses on this expedition. Of the remaining ten or so who had crossed paths with Xiao Chiye, only a few remained. A Scorpion on night patrol in the distance blew his horn, and the wind carried the sound over to Hassen. He backed away—the wolf pack was charging this way.

Hassen reluctantly mounted his horse. His hand went to the hilt of his scimitar, but before he could draw it, a gyrfalcon swooped down from the sky, its cry erupting in his ears. In the next instant, a long arrow burst through the snowstorm, darkness billowing behind it, and hurtled straight for his head.

Xiao Chiye braced himself against the ground. His back was soaked through, though he couldn't tell if it was with blood or sweat. Fingers sticky, he grabbed a handful of snow and stuffed it into his mouth, swallowing the blood between his teeth. He climbed to his feet and lunged for Hassen.

The force of it almost knocked Hassen off his horse. He struck out with his elbow—Xiao Chiye grabbed it, and Hassen's world flipped as Xiao Chiye flung him to the ground. Before Hassen could return the strike, Xiao Chiye's

fist sank into his stomach. Hassen choked out bile, hissing as he felt the ache in his mouth. He slammed a boot into Xiao Chiye's chest and levered himself up from the ground.

But Xiao Chiye was unbelievably tenacious. The only way to escape was to take him out.

Hassen understood this kind of tenacity. He broke into a run alongside his galloping horse and swung astride before Xiao Chiye could make his next attack. With a piercing whistle, he ripped off the sack tied to his saddle and held it high. Hassen's fingers tightened on the sack; never had he felt such intense unwillingness to concede a battle. But in the next moment, he flung the sack away. As he turned his horse around, he spat with disgust, voice cutting through the wind, "After tonight, my name will be a shadow over the Libei Armored Cavalry. You'll pay back double what you've owed me since the battles on the eastern mountain ranges." His red hair flared bright against the snow, the fiery manifestation of his hatred. "Take your father and scram!"

Xiao Chiye understood instantly what the sack was. The bitter wind raged as he staggered over the snow, dashing toward it with all he had. As he dropped to the ground and rolled, he caught firm hold of the sack.

Hassen cracked his horsewhip and galloped away into the vast expanse of snow.

Xiao Chiye lay on the ground, hugging the sack tightly as he stared up at the vast dome of heaven. His chest heaved. He clenched his teeth, unwilling to shed another tear. But he couldn't contain his sobs.

He couldn't.

He couldn't look at Xiao Fangxu in his arms.

The Armored Cavalry swarmed over. Zuo Qianqiu, in the lead, was first to tumble down from his horse. Countless helmets were removed in the ensuing silence.

Heavy snow buried Xiao Chiye. He heard the wails of the Hongyan Mountains. He no longer had the strength to stand; his limbs were numb. He stared fixedly at the sky, feeling as though it was him who had died instead.

The Libei Armored Cavalry had suffered their first fatal blow in twenty years, pierced through the heart. Hassen was right. After tonight, the Libei Armored Cavalry would live in his shadow. With a mere handful of Scorpions, he had ground the dignity of the Libei Armored Cavalry to dust.

This was too endless a night.

The iron wall of Libei had collapsed with a crash, leaving countless men exposed. Armor was no longer their advantage. They were like wandering souls expelled from their homes, unable to find refuge anywhere.

Xiao Jiming was waiting to receive his father in the Libei homeland. The city was quiet as the carriage rolled through the gates, the stillness broken only by the murmur of suppressed sobs.

The heir did not cry. He was neatly dressed and crowned as he descended the stairs, one step at a time, to stand before the carriage. An eternal silence followed. His body, weakened by his injuries, seemed to have shrunk from his glory days. In that heavy snow, his face was pale.

A veil of gloom shrouded the firmament.

The news spread throughout the empire a few days later. Qudu took down the banners of the Eight Great Battalions, but as Xiao Chiye was still

charged with regicide, the court sent no condolences to Libei. Even so, the people of the capital took down the colored lanterns outside their shops and hung up white flowers as a sign of mourning.

Qi Zhuyin, shedding her armor and accessories, led a unit of guards that raced through the snow toward Libei.

Xiao Fangxu was a legend. A junior soldier of Luoxia Pass who had risen to conquer the eastern range of the Hongyan Mountains, he had been the last of the Four Generals of his generation to make a name for himself. Yet he was the only one among them to have been conferred the title of prince. Lu Pingyan was in ill health, Qi Shiyu was retired, and Feng Yisheng and now Xiao Fangxu had both perished in battle. One by one, the four generals from the early days of the reign of Yongyi had all fallen. Thirty years had gone by in a rush, and those high-spirited youths had all returned to the lands to which they belonged.

After Xiao Fangxu's burial, Xiao Chiye was the picture of calm. His howls and cries seemed to have been buried in that drift of snow, vanishing without a trace the moment he seized his father back. He ate and changed the dressings on his wounds as usual, but at night, Shen Zechuan couldn't hear him breathing.

He seemed to have fallen into a deep slumber, numb as he greeted each new day.

"Sirs, my report on the ambush that night." Face swathed in bandages, the commander of Second Sand Camp, Jiang Sheng, stood in the hall before the other commanding generals. "On the eighth day of the twelfth month, while His Lordship was in First Sand Camp, he planned an ambush. His

Lordship personally led Squad Three of First Sand Camp north to the ambush site. I was to go around from the back to provide support. We aimed to intercept Hassen east of Tudalung Banner. The snow was especially heavy that day. It was dusk before we encountered Hassen's elite forces. Both sides engaged in battle, and we launched a direct assault on Hassen's forces, losing half of our men in the process.

"While taking inventory of the fallen and captured Biansha soldiers, we found that Hassen was not among them. By then, it was full dark. We drew up a plan to branch out and search westward. That was where His Lordship and I split up. I came across the Biansha Horsemen to the east of Tudalung Banner and took heavy casualties. By this time I sensed something amiss. Instead of continuing west, I went against orders and turned back to join His Lordship.

"His Lordship's troops had been similarly worn down by the Biansha's guerilla tactics. We abandoned the mission and turned back toward the camp. Halfway, we arrived at the old relay station. This is where we met the Scorpions disguised as the Libei Armored Cavalry.

"Every one of them had the token of the armored cavalry hanging from their belts. They not only understood the Zhou language, they spoke it with a Libei accent and answered our questions readily and fluently. The soldiers claimed to be subordinates of Zhao Hui's Liuyang Camps. They said they sustained severe losses from Hassen's harassment and were unable to find their way in the snowstorm, so they'd been forced to stop at the relay station."

Hands on his knees, Zhao Hui asked with a solemn expression, "How many?"

“Around sixty.” Jiang Sheng set the book he was holding on the table and looked at Xiao Chiye, who was sitting on the very end. After a short pause, he continued. “We compiled a register of names based on the tokens Er-gongzi brought back. See for yourself.”

Zhao Hui skimmed the register. “These are all brothers who have died in battle.”

Guo Weili, his voice hoarse from crying over the last few days, swore. “Fuck his ancestors. They stole armor and tokens from the dead! We must immediately inform all the major camps to clean up the battlefields personally from now on.”

“There’s no point,” a voice cut in.

Guo Weili’s hackles rose at once. “How can there be no…” But he trailed off when he saw Xiao Chiye’s face.

Xiao Chiye had brought back Xiao Fangxu; it was impossible for Guo Weili to shoot his mouth off as he had before. His expression underwent several changes, but he still ground out, “We’ll have to deal with it somehow. We can’t give them any more opportunities.”

Zuo Qianqiu, however, understood. “If Biansha can equip themselves with iron hammers, they can surely counterfeit tokens as well. What we need to do is figure out how to recognize Scorpions.”

Xiao Jiming, sitting with his cloak draped around him, contemplated for a moment. “Recall the tokens. We’ll no longer use them. Continue with what you were saying.”

Jiang Sheng drew in a breath. “The Scorpions deceived us. We laid down our blades, and that was when it happened.” At this point, he pulled his

bandages aside and exposed half his face. “Their iron hammers were specifically designed to defeat the armored cavalry. One blow to the helmet will cause blurred vision and ringing ears. You’ll black out if you are lucky; if not, you’ll die bleeding from the nose and mouth. My men couldn’t react in time, and I was knocked unconscious. I don’t know what happened after.”

This time, no one made a sound. They had all learned about the Scorpions via a private letter from Zhongbo, but no one had understood the severity of the threat they posed.

Gu Jin stepped forward with a bow and took over from Jiang Sheng. “After examining the battlefield, this is my conjecture: Hassen failed to besiege His Lordship, so he changed tactics. He outflanked him on the snowfield with his elusive elite troops and trapped His Lordship in the middle. Thus, Squad Three was totally annihilated.”

“Bullshit. I don’t believe it. His Lordship is invincible in the field.” Guo Weili pushed to his feet and paced irritably up and down, his eyes reddening at the rims. “Who the fuck is Hassen?! He was still sucking milk from his mother’s tit when His Lordship was the uncrowned king of the northern battlegrounds. We’ve been fighting Biansha across the mountains and grasslands for almost twenty years; there’s no way an armored cavalry led by His Lordship could lose!”

Guo Weili had been promoted by Xiao Jiming, but he had been recruited by Xiao Fangxu. This was something he couldn’t accept. When he was at Base Camp, the tactics he’d used against Huhelu had all been learned from Xiao Jiming, and although Xiao Fangxu had never personally taught him, Guo Weili’s style of combat was obviously an imitation of Xiao Fangxu’s.

Voices rose in the hall, the noise gradually swelling to a crescendo.

They were like a tower on the brink of collapse. Everybody's nerves were stretched taut as they struggled to stabilize the Libei Armored Cavalry, but the sense that they were inching toward complete breakdown pervaded the atmosphere.

The Prince of Libei was dead.

This phrase was like a nightmare. It sat heavy on everyone's mind, crushing them beneath its weight. They were helpless against Hassen. Only at this moment did they confront the harsh realization that the Libei Armored Cavalry had fallen behind Amur long ago.

Xiao Chiye didn't utter another word after that first comment. He sat in silence, his head aching from the noise. The injuries on his shoulder and arm plagued him. All he heard was *Hassen*, *Hassen*—this name being shouted everywhere.

The name seemed to follow him everywhere.

At night, Shen Zechuan couldn't sleep soundly; he woke every hour or so to make sure Xiao Chiye was still there. When he awoke this night, the space beside him was empty. Shen Zechuan rose and hurried to the doorway, where he found Xiao Chiye standing in the freezing courtyard dressed only in the single layer he slept in.

It was snowing again.

His shoulders were blanketed in a thin layer of white. Hearing movement, he looked back and smiled faintly at Shen Zechuan, an expression meant to reassure.

Shen Zechuan gazed at him.

Xiao Chiye's eyes gradually reddened under that gaze. Shen Zechuan watched the tears slide slowly down his cheeks. He understood everything; since that day, Xiao Chiye had been lost in his memory of the blizzard. The wolf pup that had run alone for dozens of li had not returned at all.

Shen Zechuan pushed open the door without even putting on his shoes.

Xiao Chiye had already begun to choke with sobs as he watched Shen Zechuan approach. It was as if he finally found a release for everything he'd suppressed within his heart. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he called out, "Lanzhou…"

Shen Zechuan embraced Xiao Chiye tightly and stood on tiptoe to wrap a hand around the back of his head. He made a barrier of himself, taking the devastated, battered Xiao Chiye completely into the protective shelter of his arms.

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Chapter 188:
Offense and Defense

LIBEI WAS STILL deep in grief when Biansha attacked again.

After the battle in the snow, Hassen had become the indisputable esuhuri of the Hanma tribe, his reputation comparable to that of Amur. But he didn't have time to sit around listening to compliments. He had to seize the opportunity to strike Libei while they were down. If he could shift the front line west of Tudalung Banner, the Biansha Horsemen could take over the fertile pastures along the eastern range of the Hongyan Mountains by the start of spring.

First and Second Sand Camps suffered their most brutal attack of the year. With Jiang Sheng injured and unable to command his troops, Xiao Jiming deployed Zhao Hui and Guo Weili to lead the defense. The Scorpions cost them both heavy casualties in battle.

The Libei Armored Cavalry was in a terrible predicament. Stripped of their heavy armor, they would face a swift and furious slaughter at the hands of the elite forces of Biansha. The inability of Libei's battle steeds to outrun the Biansha Horsemen also meant they were unable to escape if they were caught in a trap. Yet if they put their heavy armor back on, that elite unit of Scorpions would target them with hammers.

Guo Weili lost all three battles he fought, surviving by the skin of his teeth each time.

In the month that followed, the entire front line suffered a beatdown. It was as though Hassen wielded a scimitar in his left hand and an iron hammer

in his right, every single strike capable of landing a blow on one of Libei's vital points. Even this wasn't the most terrifying thing about him. Hassen was knowledgeable about every opponent he crossed swords with. He was extraordinarily familiar with the battlefield and had committed all the commanding generals of Libei to memory; he could counter anyone who came his way. Amur had taught the art of adaptability to Hassen without reservation, and now, on the northern battlegrounds, Hassen was executing it with incredible skill.

Zhao Hui practically rolled off the back of his horse. He handed his helmet to his deputy general and, refusing to let anyone support him, sank to the ground and threw up everything in his stomach. Both his hands were trembling. He flopped over onto his back in the snow and panted.

"First Sand Camp's commanding general, Zhao Hui, submits his military report," he said from this position. "We encountered Scorpions in the north. Their numbers far exceeded five thousand. Squad Seven, our left flank, was completely wiped out. The center was forced to retreat. We lost again."

The report was swiftly recorded by a camp aide. Urgent correspondence would be sent out of the camp immediately, to be delivered to the homeland the next day. Xiao Jiming remained out of commission, so all military affairs had to be relayed like this. To guard against surprise attacks, he gave the commanding generals of all the camps the authority to mobilize troops in the face of danger, but this also meant hotheaded generals like Guo Weili no longer had a chain holding them in check. Should they fall into a trap, it was likely they would never return.

Guo Weili emerged from the tent and extended a hand to the fallen general. Zhao Hui waved him off—he couldn't get up. The nausea from being smashed senseless through his helmet showed no sign of receding; at least lying in the snow felt a little more comfortable.

"Wu Ziyu is guarding Third Sand Camp, and Er-gongzi has yet to recover from his injuries. Who's handling the task of transporting military supplies?" Guo Weili crouched down beside Zhao Hui. He fished out a wad of tobacco from his lapels and popped it into his mouth to chew.

Zhao Hui spread his arms and answered feebly, "Chen Yang." Sensing Gui Weili's next question, he continued, "He's been by Er-gongzi's side for six years now, taking care of logistics—from things as large as the Imperial Army to ones as small as a courtyard household. He knows what he's doing. Right now he's at Border Camp making a survey of the territory so he can anticipate the supplies needed in advance. As long as the roads stay unobstructed, he'll make sure the camps have what they need."

Looking up at the snowflakes fluttering down from the sky, Guo Weili said, "We need battle steeds."

They had been lacking horses since the start of autumn. The rate at which they were losing mounts had been slower then, and the stables in the homeland could still keep up with the army's demand. But the armor-clad battle steeds couldn't withstand the heavy hammers either; their injuries were often more severe than the soldiers'. Then there was the bitter cold and rough terrain. Their horses couldn't endure these as well as the Biansha's hardy ponies could.

The sky gradually darkened. Zhao Hui regained a little energy and sat up. He wiped blood off his face, then said to Guo Weili, "That one strike

from the hammer made my nose bleed. I couldn’t wipe it away in time and swallowed it all.”

“Gross.” Guo Weili, his hair a tangled snarl, didn’t want to stand up either, having squatted until his legs were numb. He paused, then said in a low, hoarse voice, “In the past, I considered Huhelu one of Biansha’s elites. But now that I’ve encountered Hassen, I realize Huhelu is nothing.”

Zhao Hui brushed off the dusting of snow on his knees. “Hassen is bold in his deployment of troops and has infinite tricks up his sleeve. He knows us inside out.” He sighed. “And therein lies the difficulty.”

Though no one spoke of it, they all knew Hassen’s most formidable quality had yet to be displayed. Hassen had fought offensive battles against the Bianjun Commandery in the south—the hardest of all to attack—for several years. Compared to field battles, he was even better at cracking fortresses. Now that Libei had switched completely from offense to defense, the camps had become rudimentary fortresses. It wouldn’t be long before they got a personal taste of Hassen’s siege attacks coming down on them like torrential rain.

Guo Weili hated Hassen with every fiber of his being, but even he had to concede the man was a genius born for the battlefield. To date, Guo Weili had never met a general who could hold the initiative so firmly in his hands. He was as mercurial as the wind and gave Libei no chance to strike back.

“Whoever takes the initiative controls the rhythm.” Guo Weili spat out the chewed-up tobacco. “We have to stall his momentum even if we lose. Otherwise, we won’t have to wait for the beginning of spring. In less than half a month, the battleground will fall into their hands.”

Suddenly, a flickering flame appeared in the distance. Both stared at it in silence before scrambling to their feet.

“Fuck!” Squinting into the wind, Guo Weili pointed at the watchtower and bellowed, “Are you fucking blind? Who’s in the southeast?!”

The soldier on the watchtower raised a hand to shield himself from the blowing gale and heard the sound of horses’ hooves downwind. Riders were approaching on the road connecting them to Second Sand Camp in the southeast, but he couldn’t immediately determine who they were.

“The horsemen.” Zhao Hui scooped up his helmet from the ground, then shouted at the top of his lungs, “It’s the Biansha Horsemen!”

“Second Sand Camp has fallen.” Guo Weili hissed through a clenched jaw. “Hassen, that son of a bitch!”

In the chaos that ensued, they watched as that light grew closer and closer. The night patrol squad hadn’t sounded the alarm, so it was possible the southeast had been completely cut off. Along with the pounding of hooves, a heavy, clattering sound reached their ears.

“Catapults…” The helmet in Zhao Hui’s hands clanked to the ground. He said in a daze, “We’re done for.”

“Bullshit!” Guo Weili hauled Zhao Hui over and shouted as he dragged him along, “Extinguish the fucking fires in the watchtower!” He shoved Zhao Hui forward and followed up with a punch that made Zhao Hui’s nose bleed again.

“What are you, a dog?!” Zhao Hui covered his nose and spat out a mouthful of bloody foam.

“We’re wolves.” Guo Weili stared viciously toward the southeast. “The hardest iron wall in the world is not the Bianjun Commandery, it’s the Libei Armored Cavalry.” He beat his own chest with a clenched fist and hollered, “The battleground in the north belongs to Xiao Fangxu, and the Libei Armored Cavalry rule this battlefield! Whoever thinks himself a dog can eat shit! I’ll never retreat! We are *wolves*!” His eyes were red as he shouted, voice cracking, “I’ll bite those motherfuckers to death!”

Zhao Hui swiped at his bleeding nose and aimed a kick at Guo Weili from behind.

Guo Weili, jaw shadowed with stubble, locked eyes with him. “Isn’t attacking fortresses Hassen’s strong suit?”

Zhao Hui retrieved his helmet and snorted back blood. “We’ll see about that.”

There was a *click* as the mechanism kicked into action, and baffles swiftly sealed off the crenels atop all four sides of the camp walls, instantly turning First Sand Camp into an impregnable fort. The Biansha Horsemen stopped a short distance from the walls. Even in the darkness, Hassen could see the heavy crossbows protruding from those fortress walls.

A few years ago, Xiao Jiming had refitted the walls of the First, Second, and Third Sand Camps into heavy-duty ramparts. Just as Xiao Chiye had when he first faced Third Sand Camp, Hassen quickly came to understand that this was a true iron drum, one that left no opening for foes to exploit.

The watchtower fires had been extinguished. No one outside the walls could see enough to even guess the camp’s layout. Two mounted crossbows, forged by Qidong’s craftsmen, had also been hidden away in First Sand

Camp. At the time, Xiao Jiming had gone to enormous lengths to keep them from the prying eyes of Qudu. Now, the Libei Armored Cavalry pushed them out onto the ramparts.

As soldiers loaded the heavy bolts, Biansha's catapults had already begun to move. Boulders as heavy as a hundred pounds hurtled through the air, smashing into the camp's walls.

The crenels in the walls of First Sand Camp were reserved for archers; to seal these up under siege, they had added a mobile baffle wall to the parapet. But the baffles were made of wood; they couldn't withstand heavy bombardment.

Hassen clearly had his eyes on this weakness.

"Loose the arrows! Loose the arrows!" Guo Weili took large strides, slapping the backs of the cavalry as he passed them on the battlements.

A storm of short bolts rained down. Zhao Hui saw through a narrow opening in the battlement that Hassen's cavalry had retreated, and an infantry had taken their place in the vanguard. They raised a dense array of iron shields to block the hail of arrows. The arrows socked into the surface of the shields but inflicted no casualties at all.

"That's the iron shield of the Qidong Garrison Troops," Zhao Hui said. "He's absorbed the battlefield tactics of both the north and south."

"Is he a fucking jackal?!" Guo Weili shouted at the top of his lungs. He had his hands braced on the wall, listening to the intensifying sound of smashing rocks. "They're no longer a cavalry!"

He was right.

After adding an infantry equipped with iron shields, the horsemen were no longer merely a cavalry. The commanding generals had been correct to worry: In the past six years, Biansha had acquired resources they couldn't begin to imagine. It was to this that Hassen owed many of his innovations.

Loading the mounted crossbows was time-consuming. Dozens of men sweated over the weapons. One crossbow jammed just before it was fired.

"Is it broken?" Guo Weili pushed the men away, stomped on the heavy machine, and pounded it irritably a few times. "Bloody hell, Qidong's contraption—"

The crossbow trigger clicked into action, and the heavy bolt shot forth. It had caught on the corner of Guo Weili's clothes; the instant it went flying, he fell flat on his face.

The eerie whistle of those iron-headed bolts slicing through the wind followed close on the missiles' tails as they hurtled toward Hassen's men. The iron shields of Biansha came up once again, but this time it was futile—the force of impact staved the shields in. Two rows of tightly packed soldiers toppled to the ground under the resulting shockwave.

Zhao Hui had just opened his mouth to report the good news when the baffle beside his head exploded. He crouched down, hands covering his head, and was nearly impaled through the eye by a flying wooden splinter.

The baffle was destroyed.

"Fuck," Zhao Hui muttered, his head and face covered in dust. "I'll have to tell the heir to install iron ones."

A whistle sounded outside the walls, and saker falcons swooped down through the thick clouds.

Guo Weili followed suit and whistled as well. The falcon cage beside the stables slid open with a woosh. The falcons, which had been preserving their strength over the last few days, were bursting with energy. Meng flapped his wings as the tethers on his legs rattled.

The soldiers in charge of the falcons loosened the tethers. Meng wouldn't heed the whistled command of anyone but his master; he soared into the sky, circling up through the dancing snow to break through the layers of clouds. In the next instant, he dove. Iron claws dug into a saker falcon's flesh and feathers, tearing the bird into pieces in the air.

Suddenly Guo Weili heard the rumble of the back gates opening. He whipped his head around, but before he could shout, a column of light cavalry streamed in through the gap. The leader's cloak snapped in the wind as she jumped off her horse mere inches from Guo Weili.

"Hey," Qi Zhuyin greeted Guo Weili in her usual glib tones. "Busy fighting?"

Zhao Hui bounded down from the battlements and traded a look with Guo Weili between breaths. Uncertain of Qi Zhuyin's intent, he only said, "Grand Marshal."

"Don't call me that." Qi Zhuyin threw off her cloak and drew the executioner's blade at her waist. She stabbed it into the ground at her feet and laughed. "Looks like I'll have to trouble you boys to keep me company tonight."

Guo Weili promptly covered his chest with his hand and stared at Qi Zhuyin as she surveyed the surroundings.

"Let's see," she said calmly. "Who can last longer—your Libei

Armored Cavalry, or my Qidong Garrison Troops?”

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Chapter 189:
Snowtrooper

ZHAO HUI THOUGHT Qi Zhuyin had brought reinforcements from Qidong, but when he looked behind her, he saw only a few dozen personal guards. “*Troops*, Marshal?”

“I’m not here to fight the battle for you,” Qi Zhuyin said, wrapping a strip of cloth around her right hand to keep the hilt of her blade from slipping when it was soaked with blood. “But to use you to fight the battle. Starting now, you and your pal here are demoted. I’ll be taking over the post of First Sand Camp’s commanding general.”

Zhao Hui wasn’t the only one stunned by this statement. Guo Weili froze for a moment before crying, “No way!”

Qidong and Libei had always been friendly. During the fourth year of Xiande, they had joined forces to intercept the advance of the Biansha Horsemen and recover the six prefectures of Zhongbo. Even so, when it came to commanding their troops, each kept to their own—never before had they stepped into each other’s territory like this. They might address Qi Zhuyin as Grand Marshal, but that didn’t mean they were willing to heed her orders.

Qi Wei fished an authority token from the pouch at his waist and tossed it at Guo Weili. The general caught it and turned it over—it was Xiao Jiming’s own token.

The boulders had already destroyed all the baffles on the southeast wall. Single-branch cannons took their place at the crenels. Although they were called cannons, they were closer to trebuchets, with a leather sling for

loading rocks set on a long pole and launched manually. They were much less powerful than the catapults Hassen had brought. The infantry at the front of the Biansha ranks hoisted their iron shields. Now that they were at risk of being smashed by falling rocks, they had no choice but to slow their advance.

Qi Zhuyin had already drawn her blade and set off toward the walls. Zhao Hui followed, taking long strides to catch up. “First Sand Camp has only eight thousand men. We’re looking at ten thousand horsemen out there. Are you here to help us hold the camp until reinforcements arrive? But now that Second Sand Camp’s fallen, it’ll be the day after tomorrow at the earliest before we can expect reinforcements. Until then—”

“What are you nagging me about, Grandma? The walls of this camp are as thick as eight horses. Even if we lose the baffles, they can’t breach the walls. You have plenty of kerosene”—catching sight of the mounted crossbow, she continued with delight—“and even two mounted crossbows forged by our Qidong.”

“We don’t have enough heavy bolts.” Seeing that Qi Zhuyin meant to ride out of the fortress, Zhao Hui spoke more rapidly. “We can’t get back the bolts we’ve shot, and the reserves won’t last until tomorrow. Marshal, what are you unsheathing Banisher for?! Head up the wall and give us your orders. We can fight.”

Qi Zhuyin hoisted her blade and leveled her gaze at the man blocking her way. “Hassen’s ten thousand men are dragging along siege weapons they’ve never used before. To maintain the speed of their advance, he must have cut down on the rations they’re carrying. He can’t fight a protracted battle. As long as you have the patience, you can wait behind the walls until he retreats.”

She took a few steps back and raised her voice. “But miss the opportunity tonight, and you will not have another like it. Hassen regards your people as a whetstone; he intends to sharpen his new recruits on the prestige of Libei’s iron wall. Stop being silly, gentlemen. Your so-called iron wall is merely a fig leaf. How can you call yourselves the armored cavalry if you’re sticking your asses in the air like this for a beating?”

Guo Weili clenched the token in his fist. Zhao Hui could feel the tension in the air.

Qi Zhuyin pointed at the southeastern gate and turned to Guo Weili, eyes gleaming with madness. “Don’t you want to go out there and have some fun with me?”

On the battlefields of the south, the one Hassen had faced most often was Lu Guangbai. The Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops were like a stubborn rock blocking the opening in the Zhou Empire’s fence, unwilling to budge regardless of the Biansha Horsemen’s torrent of attacks. Despite this, Hassen was more familiar with the name Qi Zhuyin. He had met her in the battle that had made her Windstorm through the Scorching Plains.

Hassen was of the mind that Qi Zhuyin was two different people.

Her style when she assumed command from the rear was completely different than when she personally mounted her horse and took her blade in hand. She switched with ease between the roles of the grand marshal who oversaw the battle from the rear and the commanding general who rode out with the troops. She also differed from the calm and steady Lu Guangbai in this: She adjusted nimbly to changing circumstances and would bring down

her opponents using whatever was at her disposal. How else could she have achieved the feat of burning down the thirteen camps of Biansha?

She was adaptable, and that made her dangerous.

The fortress gate was shut tight. As the barrage of rocks hurtled from the battlements tapered off, the iron shields of Biansha pressed forward to within five hundred paces. Their iron shields now not only protected their bodies but also the battering ram they'd rolled up to the gate. This type of siege engine was specifically designed for breaking fortresses. It looked like a wagon equipped with a huge tree trunk; once they got close enough, the soldiers would use it to ram down the camp gate.

Hassen's horsemen were chafing at the bit. They were made up of Scorpions with iron hammers and elite squads with scimitars. Should the need arise, the Scorpions could switch to scimitars as well. Hassen was a patient man, but he didn't plan to let First Sand Camp stall for time. He'd ram the camp gate open, then set his cavalry loose to slaughter what remained of Libei's soldiers within.

The iron shields did their job: Under their shelter, the Biansha infantry gradually quickened their pace, keeping the battering ram from harm. When they reached the camp gate, dozens of them exerted themselves to slam the wooden trunk against the gate, sending a shower of dust down over their heads.

Hassen raised a hand, ready to charge inside.

The camp gate groaned in muffled protest. Cracks appeared around the point of impact. To allow the soldiers at the center more space to work, the infantrymen on both sides lowered their iron shields. They shouted as they

reared back, then rammed into the gate again. Wood splintered; a hole had appeared in the camp gate, which teetered on the verge of collapse.

Zhao Hui stepped out on the ruined battlement and braved the wind to look down. He shouted, “Release!”

Earthen jars came crashing down from the top of the wall. Kerosene splashed amid the sounds of shattering, coating the Biansha infantry from head to toe. With a whoosh, flame sparked, then leapt onto the Biansha Horsemen’s bodies like a nest of venomous snakes. Their iron shields couldn’t ward off fire. In no time, blood-curdling screams rose up from the attackers, and the smell of burning flesh permeated the air.

The camp gate rumbled as it was hoisted up to reveal a row of warhorses carrying soldiers in the heavy armor of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Qi Zhuyin, lightly armored, gripped Banisher as she charged like a meteor into the enemy forces, trailing hot puffs of breath from her steed.

The thunderous hooves of the armored cavalry reverberated through the snow. They followed Qi Zhuyin and trampled the iron shields before the gates. It was as if this army had risen from the ashes as they swept like a violent gale toward the Biansha Horsemen waiting beyond the infantry.

The scimitar-wielding elites promptly fell back, while the Scorpions sat firmly on their battle steeds. At Hassen’s whistled signal, they squared their shoulders and prepared to charge the enemy head-on. These same hammers that had taught the Libei Armored Cavalry their harshest lesson yet would smash the helmets of their adversary into a pulp tonight.

Zhao Hui stood at the top of the wall overlooking the battlefield, his chest heaving as he watched. Braving the wind, a Scorpion lifted his hammer and swung it at an armored cavalryman’s head—yet before it could connect,

the sharp point of a blade thrust in from the side. Both hands gripping the hilt, Qi Zhuyin used the forward momentum of her battle steed to deflect the hammer and send the Scorpion flying off his mount.

As the man hit the ground, Libei's heavily armored cavalry reined their horses around and retreated. They were deft in their withdrawal and methodical as they scattered. Hassen heard the sound of more hooves behind that heavy armor even before he saw a blade-brandishing light cavalry ride forward to take up the space they left—

No, not light cavalry. They were the Libei Armored Cavalry, without their iron armor.

Guo Weili had never felt this light before. He concentrated all the pent-up frustrations of recent days into both hands and bellowed until he was hoarse as he raced ahead. The first strike of his long sword cleaved down on the nearest Scorpion. As blood spattered over the snow, he had already charged to the very front, that familiar heat returning to his palms at last. Guo Weili was so overcome with emotion his hands were trembling.

"Damn…" He panted, almost on the verge of tears as he shouted, "Marshal—that felt amazing!"

Even Zhao Hui felt his eyes prickle with tears at this shout.

Qi Zhuyin burst into hearty laughter. Her battle steed reared, and she lifted Banisher high and brought it down on another Scorpion as the horse's front hooves landed back on the ground.

Was the Libei Armored Cavalry no longer the Libei Armored Cavalry when they took off their heavy armor? Perhaps so. But that was the Xiao Clan's Libei Armored Cavalry, not Qi Zhuyin's Libei Armored Cavalry. These men had retreated again and again in defeat on the snowy plains of the

north, and one of the reasons was their inability to match the speed of the Biansha ponies. But now, Hassen's horsemen would have to come to the Libei Armored Cavalry if they wanted to attack Libei's fort.

After driving a hole through that Scorpion, Guo Weili no longer feared the iron hammers. Without his heavy armor on, the Scorpions' swinging hammers were noticeably sluggish. What was more, the Scorpions had a weakness of their own: In order to maintain their speed, they hadn't donned any armor. The moment they lost the advantage of the iron hammers, their blood would run under Libei's long swords.

Qi Zhuyin huffed out warm air as she stared down Hassen. Even at such a distance, far across the blood-spattered battlefield, the glare she speared him with was no less vicious.

The Scorpions and their hammers were valuable assets; Hassen couldn't afford to lose them all here. Yet if he gave the command for them to retreat, Qi Zhuyin would follow suit and have Guo Weili change into heavy armor. Although she appeared reactive, she was, in fact, the proactive player who had the upper hand tonight. There was no need for her to give chase; she only needed to stand on the boundary line and wait. If Hassen wanted to press ahead, he would be serving their heads up to her on a silver platter. Before Qi Zhuyin, all their invincible strength amounted to nothing.

Bring it on. The look in Qi Zhuyin's eyes was a provocation; she threw a taunting smile in his direction and casually flicked the blood off her blade. Hassen made a swift decision.

"Retreat."

But Hassen had brought siege weapons—ones he had gone to great lengths to acquire and transport out of Zhongbo. Retreating without them

would be a terrible loss. Yet should he delegate part of his troops to transport the weapons, they would lag behind, encumbered by the supplies.

Qi Zhuyin raised her blade and urged her horse forward, leading Guo Weili's troops to give chase amid the flying snow. She knew Hassen's elite troops would be first to withdraw. This pursuit was like a gift to soothe an upset child: She led the Libei Armored Cavalry, who had been hunted down by the Biansha Horsemen time and again, to hunt the Biansha Horsemen down for once. The soldiers behind her shouted curses as they charged, relishing in the fright they gave the fleeing troops.

Guo Weili finally got his chance to vent his rage. Adrenaline pumping, he would've continued after them had not Qi Zhuyin yanked him back by the collar.

"We're going back." Qi Zhuyin looked out at the snowfield and let her smile fade. "Once you leave camp, you'll run into the same predicament as before. Hassen isn't the type to run away with his tail between his legs. Don't give him the opportunity to rally his forces."

Guo Weili had been completely won over. He nodded along with Qi Zhuyin's words, then wheeled his horse around and said, "Marshal, let's fight like this on the snowfields too. Hassen doesn't count for shit!"

"Hassen's not going to use fortress siege tactics in the wild; he won't charge forward but encircle your people instead." Qi Zhuyin pondered it. "But judging by tonight, it seems the changes he's made also need to be refined."

Hassen was expanding the Biansha Horsemen's arsenal at a rapid rate —but he was too greedy, as evidenced by the iron shields tonight. The infantry gave the Biansha Horsemen no advantage. On the contrary, they

were a liability. Men on foot couldn’t outrun battle steeds on the snowfields. The moment they fell behind, all that awaited them was death. They could only be used to attack fortress walls.

Whatever Guo Weili would have said in response was cut off by a sharp whistle. Qi Wei, who’d been speaking with the scouts, spurred his horse over to Qi Zhuyin’s side. “Marshal, soldiers approaching!”

The snow was falling harder now, brushing against the fur collars of the infantry trudging unsteadily across the snowdrift. Their hair had become white from the snow, and they walked with their heads down and shoulders hunched against the wind. They seemed exhausted, having traveled a great distance, yet they were highly organized and could quickly drop to the ground and crawl in the snow for camouflage the instant they heard the sound of horses’ hooves. These men were the most skilled infantry in the world when it came to the art of the ambush. Before traversing the desert, they had been known as the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops.

Qi Zhuyin dismounted and gazed through the heavy snow at the man at the head of the group. She was so familiar with this army she could recognize him from Qi Wei’s report alone.

The man tugged down the strip of cloth covering his stubbled jaw and stood gasping for breath. He’d been gone so long the sight of him was like a vision from a past lifetime. He smiled a little and said wearily, “Marshal, the reinforcements have arrived.”

It was the deserter, Lu Guangbai.

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Chapter 190:
Night Talk

THE BIANJUN COMMANDERY GARRISON Troops filed into First Sand Camp. They gathered around the bonfire, stripped off the face cloths they'd used as protection from the wind and snow, and wolfed down their food. As Qi Zhuyin unfastened Banisher from her belt, she noticed their spears were not the same as before. She took a seat and passed a cup of hot tea to Lu Guangbai.

Lu Guangbai looked down into the cup in silence for a long time. "His Lordship the prince…"

Sipping her own tea, Qi Zhuyin hummed in affirmation.

"How are Jiming and Ce'an?"

"Not well." Qi Zhuyin deftly cut herself a slice of roast meat with a dagger and popped it into her mouth. "Jiming can no longer ride after falling from his horse. He has to oversee the war from the homeland—a tremendous disadvantage when facing Hassen. Ce'an received serious injuries when he chased Hassen to recover His Lordship. The battlefront in the north is in desperate need of a commander. Libei is on the brink of a crisis."

"I'll head to the homeland with you, Marshal." Lu Guangbai looked at Qi Zhuyin. "I discovered the Biansha Horsemen's weakness while traversing the desert. There are a few things that can only be discussed in the presence of both you and Jiming."

"What if you're a spy?" Qi Zhuyin wiped her fingers. "This is Libei, not Qidong."

“I’ll hand these men over to Zhao Hui and have them remain in First Sand Camp as part of the garrison.” Lu Guangbai gently placed his own spear at his feet. “I can relieve myself of my troops and armor and let you escort me back to the homeland.”

Qi Zhuyin jabbed the dagger back into her belt. Staring into the blazing flames, she said, “I’ll be heading back tomorrow. You can come along.”

When dawn broke the following day, Qi Zhuyin set out with Lu Guangbai for the Libei homeland. Two days later, they arrived in the dead of night. Xiao Jiming didn’t alert anyone; he stood at the bottom of the steps to receive them personally.

A light snow was falling when Lu Guangbai dismounted. He regarded Xiao Jiming with a gaze at once familiar and foreign. Qi Zhuyin tossed her riding crop to Qi Wei and gave Lu Guangbai’s shoulder a pat as she walked up the stairs, a signal for him to follow her. Both looked back at Lu Guangbai, silently urging him to come along.

Iron Horse on River Ice, Xiao Jiming. Windstorm through the Scorching Plains, Qi Zhuyin. Beacon-Smoke and Rising Sand, Lu Guangbai.

They had chased one another throughout those years of their youth, all of them too shy to voice their own ambitions. Back then, it’d felt as though no matter how much time passed, they would always stand in the shadow of their fathers’ radiance. But the churning waves of time had toppled those walls that had sheltered them. Now, they finally reunited again amid the heavy storm.

Lu Guangbai met their eyes and took a step forward on his journey

home.

He first paid his respects to Xiao Fangxu, then followed Xiao Jiming and Qi Zhuyin into a remote courtyard. Xiao Jiming led them into a small room, warmed by an underfloor heating system until it was almost stifling. Qi Zhuyin shed her cloak and settled cross-legged on the floor. The open side door faced a small pond, and the scattered rocks within were blanketed with a layer of fresh snow. A few branches of green plum blossoms edged along the snow-white paper of the door and slanted across the night sky, the only embellishment in this secluded space.

After a moment of silence, Lu Guangbai spoke. “Half a year ago, I left the Bianjun Commandery and headed east, into the desert. My goal was to wipe out the Qingshu tribe and take over their pastures so I could station my troops there as support for Bianjun. I failed, so I was forced to go deeper into the desert. In the fifth month, I reached the eastern side of Gedal, where I saw Amur’s granaries.”

“It’s just as we thought,” said Qi Zhuyin. “Amur’s supply lines really do go through Zhongbo.” Chopsticks in hand, she absent-mindedly took a few bites. “Putting the granaries in the middle is the best option if the intent is to supply both the northern and southern battlefronts.”

“Amur’s farm fields are there too.” Lu Guangbai curled his fingers around the teacup and looked up at them. “He reclaimed the wastelands east of Gedal and had the Liaoying tribe farm the way we do while they send out their falcons to hunt. The Qingshu tribe down south is only there to distract Qidong. Amur has partitioned the land east of Gedal into its own undisturbed region. He carried out his farming experiment there, imitating our military fields system, and is presently working on founding a new city.”

Xiao Jiming and Qi Zhuyin were both stunned.

“We must unify the lines of battle in the north and south,” Lu Guangbai said slowly. “And we have to convince Qudu to cease the infighting. Amur has grown into a behemoth. He wants to become the great king on both sides of the Chashi River.”

“I had three objectives for this trip up north.” Qi Zhuyin set down her chopsticks and paused for a moment. “The first was to see the Scorpions firsthand. The second was to evaluate whether the Libei Armored Cavalry can still be salvaged, and the third was to persuade Jiming to make peace with Qudu.”

“That’s impossible,” Xiao Jiming replied, his tone mild. “Libei has its own supply lines now. We’ve just formed an alliance with Zhongbo to the south; a truce with Qudu would mean handing over all the advantages we have now.”

“If Libei insists on making an enemy of Qudu, then Qudu will render no assistance to Libei,” Qi Zhuyin said. “You know the empress dowager is a stubborn old mule.”

“I will never”—Xiao Jiming’s gaze on Qi Zhuyin was steady, his words resolute—“*ever* hand my younger brother over to them again, nor my wife, nor my son. No one will take them from me. Libei doesn’t need Qudu’s assistance. The empress dowager should look to the Eight Great Battalions to ensure her own safety.”

Xiao Jiming was rarely so blunt. His scholarly and refined appearance often made people forget he was the one who had established Libei’s camps. Merely half a year ago, he had been the commander of all the northern battlefields.

Worried they'd argue, Lu Guangbai began in a soothing tone, "We can __"

"It's pointless." Qi Zhuyin sat up a little straighter and looked at Xiao Jiming. "Xiao Jiming will not agree."

Lu Guangbai sighed. "Marshal."

"But I have to remind you that, before the unification of the battle lines, we are not in the same camp." Qi Zhuyin gestured to herself, then to Xiao Jiming. "If our armies merge, whose commands do we heed? Meanwhile, Libei has to stay on its toes in case Qudu sends its regards. If, and I mean *if*," Qi Zhuyin said mercilessly, "the Libei Armored Cavalry should lose their commander *again*, who will assume responsibility for the northern front?"

Qi Zhuyin had long warned Libei about the danger of pinning the faith of the entire army on one person. Libei was an inflexible iron wall that padlocked its commanding generals to its camps. Zhao Hui had to bring along his Three Great Battalions of Liuyang when he marched north, and Guo Weili had to take along his Base Camp troops when he marched south. The swapping of battle lines was both time-consuming and labor-intensive. And if a commanding general died in battle, the chances of launching a counterattack were almost nil.

As a matter of fact, all the camps had experienced this problem in the earliest days, when Great Zhou first set up defenses at the frontier. Due to geographical constraints and varying rules of recruitment, the camps had all developed differently. The commanding general was the heart of the soldiers, and the soldiers were the limbs of their commanding general. If both parties were to have a flawless, wordless understanding of one another, they needed

to work together for years or even decades. For this reason, it was a major taboo to change generals just before a battle.

Qidong had been the first to realize this problem. They were not like Libei, who faced the open grasslands and the treacherous marshes. They had Tianfei Watchtower and Suotian Pass on both sides to shield them. As long as they could maintain the defense of their one and only opening—Bianjun—they could rest easy. Thus, during the reign of Yongyi, Qi Shiyu set the recruitment standard for the entire territory of Qidong. Their soldiers didn't need a specific commanding general; everyone was familiar with the same battlefield. When Qi Zhuyin took up her command, she set up the generals' barracks in the Cangjun Commandery. More than ten commanding generals under her went wherever she deployed them, which made it fairly easy to manage all the battle lines. And if any of them were unfortunate enough to become a casualty, it wouldn't affect the overall military situation.

But with any gain came losses. Qidong had no generals with such distinctive personalities as the generals from Libei. Their standardized selection criteria practically ensured generals with individual styles would remain a rarity in Qidong in years to come.

"Zhongbo lies between the northern and southern battlefronts," said Xiao Jiming. "It's impossible for us to merge, so there's no need to decide whose command to heed. Qudu is now blockaded by Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou to the northeast. Before they can send any regards to Libei, they must first talk to Shen Zechuan. As for Libei's commander—Zhuyin, I have long since lost my qualifications to hold this position."

Xiao Jiming lifted the teapot with long, slender fingers and brewed the tea with deft movements. Behind the haze of steam, there were no signs of

self-pity or reproach to be found in his expression. “When Hassen took my father’s head, he told A-Ye he was returning the favor, an eye for an eye.”

His hands stilled. His face was indifferent as he glanced at Qi Zhuyin. “I know you think the Libei Armored Cavalry is too centralized, but right now, I have no choice but to stick to the well-trodden path. We’ll still meet them head-on, and give back every strike we’ve gotten. The Libei Armored Cavalry’s faith does not lie only in my father. If that’s what Hassen really thinks, he’s grossly mistaken. Our faith lies in the land itself. Hassen defeated my father, but he can never defeat Libei.

“Thirty years ago, my father took strength from the land beneath his feet to march forward without fear, and it is with this same strength that Libei has come so far today. We will never concede defeat so easily. The new king wolf is young, strong, hungry for victory. He can step to the fore and take my father’s place. When we’re ready to fight back, he will swiftly rally the hearts and minds of those who have lost morale. I am not that man, but I have taken over the heavy responsibility of tempering him. He is my blade now; I want him to shine in all his glory when he emerges from his sheath.”

“But from what I’ve heard,” Qi Zhuyin countered, “he hasn’t truly engaged with the major camps. Your Libei generals aren’t the obedient puppies of Qidong. Their hearts and minds have not been won over.”

“But he’s familiar with every inch of Libei’s territory,” Xiao Jiming said. “He’s run through all these roads in the last six months; he knows the swiftest paths to deliver supplies, the most direct routes to mobilize reinforcements, and the consumption rates at all the camps. These are all gifts my father gave him. Zhuyin, all he lacks is a little time.”

“That’s where I come in.” Lu Guangbai picked up the thread of conversation, as if on cue. “How to go about unifying the battle lines is for both of you to deal with. What I want to talk about is how to deal with Hassen and buy some time for Libei.”

“You modified the spears of the Bianjun Garrison Troops,” Qi Zhuyin said, recalling those snow-covered infantrymen.

“That’s right. After I lost to the Qingshu tribe, I encountered the other tribes one after another.” Lu Guangbai paused for a moment with his hands on his knees. He continued solemnly, “I lost every battle.”

“Ah.” Qi Zhuyin wracked her brain to console him. “That must have weighed heavy.”

“What’s more, I was fighting on an empty stomach. I scurried between tribes, fighting for our daily meals. But we kept trading blows, and it was from these skirmishes that I discovered the horsemen’s weakness.” Lu Guangbai turned and retrieved the spear behind him, laying it across his knees. He unwound the strip of cloth covering it to reveal the body of the spear within.

“You increased the length of the spearhead.” Xiao Jiming measured with his outspread fingers. “But—isn’t this a tad too long?”

“You added barbs.” Qi Zhuyin examined it. “How did you secure them?”

Lu Guangbai swatted their hands away and caressed the spear like it was his most prized possession. “I’m an infantryman. When we fought battles with the Biansha Horsemen back in Bianjun, we relied on the terrain to set our ambushes. But there are only sand dunes in the desert. We had none of our previous advantages; I was forced to confront the horsemen head-on. At

first, I just wanted to put more distance between us and the enemy to give us time to make our escape, so I lengthened the haft of the spear. But the spears were too long—it made it hard to hold our bearing when brandishing it, and hard to maneuver in combat. Being unable to turn in time to meet their onslaught would just get us cut down."

Lu Guangbai had realized that the horsemen were circling around their flanks to avoid the spearheads at the front of their formation.

"So I shortened the haft again but increased the length of the spearhead." Lu Guangbai looked at both of them and smiled. "As long as the battle formation is organized so the spearheads face outward on all four sides, it's a mobile battering ram. If they charge in at high speed, my soldiers can stab them off their horses. The unusually long head of the spear also makes it impossible for them to wrest it away from the other end. Once they're hit, they're unlikely to survive."

Xiao Jiming and Qi Zhuyin sank deep in thought.

"But the horsemen were quick to react," Lu Guangbai continued. "They no longer attacked head-on but encircled me instead. This felt like fishing, so I took the pike daggers I'd recovered during our battles and secured them perpendicular to the spearheads with some hemp rope. Even if we didn't stab them cleanly, we could use the barbs to drag them off their horses. But hemp rope wears out easily—which is why I'll have to borrow money from you two to forge barbs into this batch of spears."

"What money?" This subject was guaranteed to set Qi Zhuyin off. "I'm a grand marshal, but all I have to my name is a shitload of debt. I even cut the rouge expenses of my father's concubines to help pay it off. Don't talk to me about money unless you want a beatdown."

Lu Guangbai turned to Xiao Jiming.

“Our Libei…” Xiao Jiming faltered. “Shen Zechuan is at home now too. Maybe you can discuss it with him?”

Lu Guangbai rewrapped the spear. He made as if to speak, then hesitated. Eventually, he asked, “Why is *he* here? Didn’t he used to play for a different side?”

“The world has gone mad,” Qi Zhuyin said. “Haven’t you heard? Shen Zechuan is now the tiger of Zhongbo. He has a close, mutually beneficial relationship with Libei up north, and steers the ship that is the Yan Clan of Hezhou down south. He’s erected a wall around himself northeast of Qudu. Basically, you can sum him up in one word.”

“Which is?”

“Rich,” Xiao Jiming said.

Qi Zhuyin put in, “Zhongbo sits between the north and south. The issues we’re discussing now all come back to Shen Zechuan—we can’t skirt around him. Besides, the so-called unification of battle lines will also require effort on Zhongbo’s part. Now’s a good time to cut off Amur’s supply line there.”

“We can discuss more in-depth tonight. He’ll be here with his advisor.” Xiao Jiming sipped his tea.

“I just have one question.” Qi Zhuyin rotated her teacup between her palms. “What exactly did Libei use to convince him?”

This question stumped Xiao Jiming. After a moment of silence, the heir replied, “Looks, I guess.”

Silence descended over the room.

“Let’s return to the matter at hand,” Qi Zhuyin said, steering the conversation back around. “This spear can go up against the horsemen, but it’s not suitable for the Libei Armored Cavalry. I fought the Scorpions in First Sand Camp—they’re not as strong as I expected. Those iron hammers are only effective against your Libei Armored Cavalry. Put them on the battlefields of the south and they’ll become a liability; they pose no real threat to our Qidong Garrison Troops. In my opinion, Amur won’t transfer these Scorpions away from the northern battlefield. But as long as they remain, the armored cavalry will be forced to cower inside the camps. They can’t meet Hassen in the field.”

“Until we find a way to deal with the iron hammers,” Xiao Jiming said, “defensive battles can buy us time.”

“Hassen’s already guessed your strategy.” Qi Zhuyin recalled the details of the battle at First Sand Camp. “He added iron shields to his arsenal and equipped his troops with siege engines from the empire. Perhaps he’s still adapting to them, but he’ll find his footing after a few battles. In half a year at most, Hassen will be able to use them proficiently. At that point defensive battles won’t be enough to protect Libei.”

“Which is why we need the aid of the Qidong Garrison Troops.” Xiao Jiming tapped his fingertips against the teapot absentmindedly. “I’m guessing Amur’s field crops on the east of Gedal haven’t reached the point where they can support the four tribes. He remains dependent on grain from the empire. Shen Zechuan will choke off Amur’s supply lines in Zhongbo. All the Qidong Garrison Troops need to do is march out of Bianjun and attack the Qingshu tribe. Increasing the pressure on Amur in the south will suffice.”

Qi Zhuyin's head had begun to ache. Deploying troops eastward would require approval from the Ministry of War in Qudu. This was unlike the matter of handing over Lu Pingyan; if Qudu cut off their provisions as a result, she would have to deal with the aftermath on her own. But Qi Zhuyin made no mention of this. She merely nodded to show she'd heard.

The next day, Xiao Chiye received Meng in the courtyard. After remaining on the front line for days on end, Meng was covered in snow, and his claws were filthy beyond recognition. Xiao Chiye allowed him to perch on his arm and cleaned up his feathers and talons.

In the midst of this activity, Gu Jin entered the courtyard and spoke a few soft words. Xiao Chiye looked back and saw Lu Guangbai standing in the lightly falling snow.

Lu Guangbai had just kowtowed to his father Lu Pingyan. Instead of heading inside to warm up, he sat beneath the eaves and waited as Xiao Chiye approached. He couldn't help but exclaim, "You brat. Did you grow taller again in the past six months?"

"At this age?" Xiao Chiye released Meng and settled at Lu Guangbai's side to loosen his arm guard. "I won't be growing any taller."

Lu Guangbai sat looking at him, allowing the snow to cover his shoulders. "But you will become stronger still."

Xiao Chiye stroked the arm guard and said nothing.

"Ce'an, let me tell you a few things." Lu Guangbai no longer called him *A-Ye*, but addressed Xiao Chiye by his courtesy name. Xiao Chiye was

not a wolf pup anymore. He could sit at the same table as Lu Guangbai, not just as a little brother, but as an equal.

Lu Guangbai looked out into the courtyard. “You know of your brother’s past, but you don’t know the marshal’s. During the early years in Qidong, the Qi Clan had no heir of lawful birth. Qi Shiyu looked for a capable youth among his sons of common birth to no avail. It was around this time that the marshal declared she wanted to become a general. Qi Shiyu took it as a joke—as did I. I thought there was no way a woman could wield a sword; it was enough that she could hold an embroidery needle. But she was so insistent that Qi Shiyu put her in the Cangjun Commandery Garrison Troops, right under his nose.”

Qi Zhuyin had thrown herself into her training with great enthusiasm, but she quickly saw the futility in it. She didn’t fit in; no one was willing to accept her, much less take orders from her. The soldiers were polite with her only on account of Qi Shiyu.

“She insisted on being transferred to the Bianjun Commandery,” Lu Guangbai continued. “Qi Shiyu entrusted her to my father, but she wasn’t one to do as she was told. At that time, my brothers were still at home, and I had no desire to become a general. Once she arrived, I thought at least I’d no longer come in last place. Who’d’ve guessed she was so tough she’d leave us all in the dust?”

Qi Zhuyin had summoned the patience normally required for embroidery to employ in her own training. She got used to the ridicule and knew what they said behind her back, but she never seemed to get angry. She remained in the Bianjun Commandery.

Lu Guangbai brushed snowflakes off his knees. “Qi Shiyu let her be, so there she stayed. Lots of her fellow soldiers bullied her when we were in the desert. They yanked her by her ankles and told her to run back home, but all she said was *no*. She crawled out of those yellow sands with her hands, feet, and even her teeth, suffering blows until she was bruised and battered all over. Back then, she looked like she would eat those people alive.”

But when Qi Zhuyin finally stood up on the sand dunes, she had burst into tears. She was on the verge of a breakdown as she shouted, *You pieces of shit!* She’d grabbed Lu Guangbai by the collar and questioned him over and over in anguish. *What part of me isn’t good enough?!*

Lu Guangbai’s past unease came rushing back to him as he continued, “I almost died of fright.”

“What happened after that?” Xiao Chiye asked. “Did Qi Shiyu take her back?”

“After that, she wiped her snot and tears and dragged her blade back to camp.” Lu Guangbai chuckled along with Xiao Chiye, but his laughter was followed by a sigh. “After that, she attained a small military achievement. Going by the book, she should have been promoted to squad commander. My father promoted her—but no one was willing to serve under her command. She sat waiting for her men to report from dawn to dusk. Finally, she asked one of the soldiers why he was unwilling to follow her orders. The answer she got was *because you can’t even lift an executioner’s blade*.”

The Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops did not use executioner’s blades. Such blades were heavy and cumbersome; few could truly carry such a thing onto the battlefield. However, Qi Zhuyin believed it. From then on,

she abandoned the slim saber she had previously used and switched to the executioner’s blade.

“Honestly, it was ludicrous. I thought she was stupid back then. It was as if she couldn’t understand that the reason everyone rejected her wasn’t because she wasn’t capable—it was because she was a woman.”

The words the world had uttered to her most often were *It’s a pity you’re a girl.* But Qi Zhuyin herself had never shared this sentiment. To her mind, there was nothing bad about being Qi Shiyu’s daughter—just as there was nothing surprising in the fact that some people enjoyed embroidery and others enjoyed the battlefield.

Lu Guangbai looked up at Xiao Chiye. “Qi Shiyu eventually took her back. But she didn’t give up when she returned to the Cangjun Commandery. She tagged along behind Qi Shiyu’s commanding generals and learned everything they knew. She’d already displayed spectacular talent back then, but no one was willing to appreciate it until the battle that year. When all her brothers abandoned Qi Shiyu, no one else in the Cangjun Commandery was willing to step forward and face the enemy.

“That night, Qi Zhuyin rode across the commandery and knocked on countless doors, only to have them slammed in her face. Against all odds, she left Cangjun Commandery and persuaded the various major garrison troops until her voice went hoarse, regardless of whether anyone took heed. Finally, she brought her father home—just as you did.

“That battle was the beginning of her rise to prominence. It propelled her into the public eye. When Qudu was unwilling to confer a noble rank or title upon her, many assumed she would be cowed. But Ce’an, I never again saw her cry in anguish the way she did that day in the desert. She matured

quickly through all these trials and tribulations. Qi Zhuyin assumed the position of grand marshal of Qidong's five commanderies not because she was obligated to, but because she *could*. That's exactly where she belongs."

She was born to the battlefield.

"The same goes for you," Lu Guangbai concluded.

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Chapter 191:
Lunar New Year's Eve

IN THE EVENING, north and south gathered.

Xiao Chiye lifted the curtain, and Shen Zechuan ducked to enter, leading Xiao Jiming's son Xiao Xun by the hand. The discussion in the hall came to a halt. The little boy took off his fur collar and oversleeves himself, then handed them to Gu Jin before making a beeline for his father and sitting politely on his heels at his father's side.

During this interval, Qi Zhuyin tilted her head to whisper to Lu Yizhi, who was cradling her teacup in both hands, "You didn't give your son away to him, did you?"

Before Lu Yizhi could answer, her son turned to look at Qi Zhuyin as if he'd sensed her question. She whispered back, "Oh, no. Xun-er heard you."

Xiao Xun bowed in greeting to Qi Zhuyin, who took a sheepish sip of her tea. The boy resembled Xiao Jiming, but without his father's refined and easygoing nature. He didn't smile often, and when he kept his little face straight, he appeared particularly solemn.

"Who does he take after?" Lu Yizhi muttered ruefully.

On the other side of the room, Shen Zechuan had taken his seat with Xiao Chiye to his left and Yao Wenyu to his right. To the left of Xiao Chiye were men from Libei, and to the right of Yao Wenyu were men from Qidong. The contingent from Zhongbo was the fewest in number, but they had an outsized presence that proved impossible to overlook.

“Zhongbo has three prefectures it has yet to reclaim,” Qi Zhuyin said to Shen Zechuan. “We hope the prefectural governor can complete the reunification of Zhongbo before winter next year.”

“If the marshal is willing to go easy on Fanzhou and Dengzhou,” Shen Zechuan said, “I’d naturally be happy to oblige.”

“I can’t make any promises.” Qi Zhuyin smiled. “My hands are tied if Qudu commands me to crush King Yi.”

Yao Wenyu understood. It wasn’t that she was truly helpless; she hoped to use King Yi to extort next year’s military provisions from Shen Zechuan so she could make preparations for an attack on the Qingshu tribe.

“The fact that the marshal is now sitting in Libei,” Yao Wenyu remarked placidly, “means abandoning the expedition against King Yi is merely a matter of a few words.”

The battle lines in the north and south were soon to be integrated into one. Qi Zhuyin had turned a deaf ear to all Qudu’s deployment orders so far, one after another. If she were truly afraid, she wouldn’t have come to Libei at all. But how could Qi Zhuyin resist taking a stab at fleecing Shen Zechuan? She was dirt poor.

“I came to Libei in secret. It’s not the same as directly defying a ruler’s commands,” Qi Zhuyin said. “Your Cizhou has been a hive of activity this year. If I delay marching on King Yi any longer, your military drill grounds will be set up right at the entrance of Dancheng. The title ‘prefectural governor’ is interesting too. The way I see it, it’s no different from ‘King Yi.’”

“That’s a gross misunderstanding.” Shen Zechuan smiled. “From Chazhou to Dunzhou, we’ve done everything by the book. How remarkable

could the title of prefectural governor be? Nothing in the current laws and regulations suggests it's inappropriate. I'm merely a guest of Cizhou's prefect."

He was making the most of a clever loophole: By not establishing himself under his own banner, he could not be said to have risen in revolt. In truth, Cizhou had long since broken from Qudu's governance; Qudu simply hadn't dared to issue an official notice. One reason was that they feared Cizhou really would ally itself with Libei in a moment of desperation and try to take over Dancheng. Another was that they feared other regions would follow suit. Yet, owing to their internal strife, Qudu hadn't shown any intention of offering amnesty to Shen Zechuan if he once again pledged loyalty to the emperor. As a result, all Qi Zhuyin had to threaten Shen Zechuan with at the moment was King Yi.

Had this threat been made a month ago, Shen Zechuan would have been hard-pressed to deal with it. But now, among all those present tonight, he was the linchpin in the establishment of the north-south battle line. Silver and grain had become his greatest playing cards, and he planned to exchange his hand for maximum benefits. In the same way Qi Zhuyin wanted to fleece him, he similarly wanted to fleece Qi Zhuyin.

"Han Jin is still in your hands," Qi Zhuyin said. "Cizhou is guilty based on this alone."

"Han Jin." Shen Zechuan tested the name in his mouth. There was no trace of fear in his eyes. "Who can say if he's in my hands?"

This was why Qi Zhuyin was so loath to visit Qudu. Dealing with seasoned schemers like Shen Zechuan was exhausting. These people talked in circles without making an inch of progress, passing the buck back and forth

until everyone was at the end of their rope. She was reminded of the feeling she had whenever she demanded money from the Ministry of Revenue.

“Even if I ignore Fanzhou and Dengzhou and let you gobble them up, what of Duanzhou?” Qi Zhuyin argued, changing tack. “You have less than forty thousand soldiers at your disposal, twenty thousand of which are new recruits. An army like that can’t be ready to recapture Duanzhou from the Biansha Horsemen.”

By this, she meant for Shen Zechuan to plead with Qidong to lend them troops.

But Xiao Chiye was next to pipe up. “I’ll head over to Duanzhou by the second month at the latest.”

“Although Zhongbo doesn’t require Qidong’s assistance at the moment, the ability of the Qidong Garrison Troops to deal a blow to the Qingshu tribe has direct bearing on the battlefields of the north,” Yao Wenyu continued. “As such, Cizhou is willing to share the marshal’s burden. Before coming to Libei, the prefectural governor considered the issue of military provisions for the marshal. If Qudu dares to cut off the marshal’s supplies, then half of Qidong’s provisions next year will be furnished by Hezhou.”

Yao Wenyu had chosen his words carefully. When Shen Zechuan was fleecing Yan Heru the Sheep in Dunzhou, Yan Heru had committed to shouldering the burden of Qidong’s military provisions. Shen Zechuan had taken out a part of it and ordered Yan Heru to think of a way to make up the shortfall. What Yao Wenyu said could be considered truth; they had simply elided some key details to erase Yan Heru from the picture.

Knowing Shen Zechuan aimed to take a coin from every purse they came across, Yao Wenyu continued after a moment’s pause, “However, the

marshal is correct. Zhongbo has only thirty-six thousand soldiers, a negligible number compared to both parties present. But Duanzhou is Zhongbo's eastern gate. If it's not shut tight, there's no way we can cut off Biansha's supply lines—not to mention the risk that the enemy will use this opening to erode Zhongbo from within. If they cut the northern battlegrounds entirely off from the south, they'll be able to surround Libei completely."

So.… Qi Zhuyin thought.

Sure enough, Yao Wenyu continued, "So we hope to establish a road that directly links Libei to Qidong next year, and to obtain some pointers regarding the regimentation of military camps."

Regimentation of military camps was a subtle way of putting it. What he clearly meant was that Shen Zechuan would like Qidong's commanding generals to help them train a garrison next year, one capable of marching into battle on behalf of Zhongbo. Libei was all cavalry, while the garrison troops of Zhongbo were all infantry. He could only ask Qidong for help in this matter.

The request revealed considerable ambition on his part; everyone in attendance sensed as much. Shen Zechuan did not want to rely on the Libei Armored Cavalry or simply borrow soldiers from Qidong. He sought to establish his own forces and restore Zhongbo's line of defense in the east.

Everyone sighed with emotion. Money truly made the lord. The silver for military provisions alone, coupled with the expenses of equipment, establishing and maintaining the road, rebuilding cities, and so on—all of it would add up to several million taels within a year. In the past, Qudu had come up with all kinds of excuses to push this off, begging poverty, yet here Shen Zechuan was getting down to business right off the bat.

“Also, regarding the cavalry the prefectural governor and His Lordship discussed previously,” Yao Wenyu went on, turning to Xiao Jiming. “Will Libei still be able to supply battle steeds at the start of spring next year?”

They were losing trained warhorses on the front lines at an unprecedented rate. If Libei couldn’t spare any horses when the pastures sprang to life at the start of spring, Shen Zechuan had already indicated they could postpone this part of their agreement.

“Yes, but Zhongbo will have to let us use Mount Luo as a stable,” Xiao Jiming replied without batting an eye.

This was Xiao Jiming’s plan. The only general under Xiao Chiye’s direct command was Tantai Hu, and stationing him in Dunzhou as he had was equivalent to giving him to Shen Zechuan. When Xiao Chiye rode for Duanzhou in the second month, it would be inconvenient for him to receive fresh battle steeds all the way from Border Camp. But if Libei were to establish new stables on Mount Luo, it would not only ease the strain on Border Camp in transporting supplies, but also allow Libei to establish a minor defensive presence in Zhongbo. Even if Duanzhou should fall—or if Shen Zechuan should turn against Xiao Chiye—Libei wouldn’t be entirely without recourse.

“Is Duanzhou establishing a cavalry of its own?” asked Lu Guangbai.

Shen Zechuan was still ruminating over the specific uses of this cavalry. He merely answered, “Giving a light cavalry a try. We’ll decide on the specifics once we have the battle steeds next year. Does General Lu plan to remain on the northern battlegrounds?”

Lu Guangbai nodded. “Right now, what Libei needs is time. My troops can hold off Hassen’s scimitars on the battlefields here. And I’m intrigued by

those Scorpions.”

“In that case, I have a request as well,” Qi Zhuyin said. “If Lu Guangbai will be staying in the north, in exchange, I want Xiao Chiye to head down to the southern battlegrounds in the sixth month next year and take command of the Bianjun Commandery on my behalf.”

Xiao Chiye was taken aback.

Qi Zhuyin tapped the table and said nothing more. But Xiao Jiming and Lu Guangbai both understood—Qi Zhuyin was giving Xiao Chiye his chance.

On the banks of the Chashi River, the heavens had blessed the Liaoying tribe with a man named Amur. They then bestowed upon Amur a son with extraordinary talent. Father and son had propelled the Biansha Horsemen to prominence along the river banks, relying on their strategies and scimitars to break the Zhou Empire. At this moment, perhaps Amur thought the stage well set to usher in an era that belonged to the Biansha people. He saw the curtains rising on a new world. Biansha would bid farewell to the pain and suffering of trudging barefoot through the snowstorm. After enduring so many trials, they were finally ready to leave their barren lands and establish their own dynasty on fertile soil.

That winter, the eastern and western territories of the Zhou empire were thoroughly split. The lands Shen Zechuan claimed barred Qudu’s access to both the eastern and northern borders. He had spent half a year completing this wall, bridging the northern and southern battlefronts through the tattered mess that was Zhongbo. Though he had yet to point his sword directly at Qudu, the scales of power had tilted, exposing an inkling of his ambitions.

This year, Libei lit no lanterns or firecrackers, but the New Year's festivities were not entirely absent: Shen Zechuan got to enjoy a New Year's Eve dinner. While trying to stay up to greet the turn of the year, he drifted off despite himself. Xiao Chiye placed a new folding fan and a few copper coins beside his pillow. When Shen Zechuan stirred, half asleep, Xiao Chiye stroked his hair, lulling him back into slumber.

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Deep in the night, Xiao Chiye stripped off his shirt. His entire back was occupied by a tattooed wolf, which spanned from his left shoulder all the way to his waist. All the howls of rage and anguish that had torn him apart were engraved here in ink. This wolf was not perfect: The space that should have been its left eye was reserved for the injury on the back of his shoulder. It looked as though it had been gouged out, making the creature appear all the more ferocious.

Xiao Chiye couldn’t forget the humiliation he’d suffered in that heavy snow.

Hassen was right.

Everyone ought to return the favor, an eye for an eye.

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Chapter 192:
The Snow Beckons

THE NEW YEAR had hardly begun before Zhongbo was hit by a blizzard. The sudden onslaught of snow led to houses collapsing under its weight throughout all six prefectures. Fortunately, the roads had been repaired just before the new year, so communication between Cizhou and its neighbors, Chazhou and Dunzhou, went on uninterrupted. Luo Mu and Tantai Hu promptly reported the casualties and were well on their way to dealing with the situation before morning, mitigating the worst of the damage caused by the snowstorm.

Shen Zechuan got no rest either; he and the advisors stayed in the study all night discussing disaster relief.

“Cizhou suffered brutal snow storms the year before last, so even before the first snow this year, the yamen’s been keeping a close eye on our grain reserves.” Zhou Gui flipped through the report on the table. “But the reinforcement of residential dwellings is indeed a problem. We cannot continue cobbling together solutions only when the houses collapse every year.”

“But where will the money for this extra expense come from?” Kong Ling cut in from the seat opposite him. “There’s nothing left to spare this year after the military expenditures.”

Shen Zechuan, occupying the center seat, had pinched the center of his brows until the skin turned pink. His head was spinning. On the other side of the partition, there was a ceaseless clacking of abacus beads from the shop

assistants who had been transferred from the shops in Hezhou and Juexi to help with the accounts. Charcoal braziers had been set up in the study to ward off the bitter chill of the past few days, but with so many people crammed inside, the air had grown unbearably stuffy after a few hours.

“The war is of utmost importance,” said Shen Zechuan. “We can’t skimp on military expenses. Allocate money from the taxes and duties the merchants paid last year.”

“This period before spring is but a brief hurdle,” Yao Wenyu assured him. “As long as we can survive these three months, things will take a turn for the better once the snow melts. The coarse tea the merchants obtained from Libei’s trade market is selling well at the Port of Yongyi, so we can increase the commercial tax on it accordingly this year.”

Shen Zechuan used the edge of his folding fan to push aside his cup of cooled tea. “If we’re to keep the copper mines in Juexi operational, we’ll have to deal with the Provincial Administration Commission of Juexi at some point. How smoothly things go after spring this year will depend on how Qudu decides to play their hand.”

Jiang Qingshan, the official overseeing Juexi, was well-acquainted with all business dealings within the territory. If Qudu ordered him to choke off Cizhou’s northwestern tea trade route, it would indeed be a blow.

“On the bright side,” said Kong Ling, rubbing his knees, “the auspicious snow augurs a good harvest.”

“For our three prefectures, yes, but the commoners in Fanzhou and Dengzhou will suffer.” Shen Zechuan had been ruminating over the problem of Fanzhou more and more frequently these days. “King Yi seized all the granaries within the two prefectures for himself before the turn of the year.

Many starved to death even before this snowstorm. I've spent nights tossing and turning over this problem."

"If we're planning to pit our troops against Duanzhou in the second month," Zhou Gui said, "it'd be best to deal with Fanzhou and Dengzhou as soon as possible."

The Cizhou Garrison Troops had only twenty thousand soldiers. The troops in Dunzhou brought them to thirty thousand in total. If they faced the Biansha Horsemen in Duanzhou in the second month while splitting their attention to keep an eye on King Yi, there would be a gap in Cizhou's defenses. Should the Eight Great Battalions sneak over from Dancheng at the same time, they would be truly overwhelmed.

"Now is the time to take down Fanzhou." Yao Wenyu brushed aside the foam in his tea. "The commoners of Fanzhou have long voiced their discontent with King Yi's insatiable greed. Someone will topple him before long. Why not make the first move and issue an official declaration of war?"

Kong Ling, who preferred a steadier approach, furrowed his brow at the idea. "This situation is different from the so-called bandit suppression a year ago; we've now reached an agreement with the battlefields to the north and south. If we issue a declaration of war and King Yi refuses to surrender, we'll be giving Qudu the excuse they need to deploy their troops."

"Mister Chengfeng has a point. But since the prefectural governor took his title before the new year, there's no benefit in maintaining a veneer of peace with Qudu." Yao Wenyu, who had yet to take even a sip of his tea, looked at Shen Zechuan. "In my opinion, Qudu won't dare dispatch troops now, even if given legitimate cause to do so."

But Kong Ling remained concerned. “If we openly rebel, it’s bound to impact our business in Juexi this year. All else aside, if Jiang Qingshan takes the opportunity to shut down the Xi Clan’s copper mines, won’t we lose more than we stand to gain? Your Lordship, in my humble opinion, the better tactic would be to send troops to Fanzhou surreptitiously.”

“His Lordship’s occupation of Zhongbo is as inexorable as it is widely known,” Yao Wenyu countered. “Even without a declaration of war, if Jiang Qingshan wishes, he will think of a way to shut down the Xi Clan’s copper mines.”

Neither man was willing to concede.

Shen Zechuan tapped his fan against his fingertips; after a moment, he said, “Shenwei, draft the declaration.”

They had spent the entire night in conversation in the study. Seeing that the discussion was more or less concluded, Fei Sheng called for the attendants to serve breakfast. Everyone helped themselves to the simple meal and hurried back to rest—they would reconvene that evening to make in-depth plans for the deployment of troops.

When Kong Ling saw Yao Wenyu about to head out, he stepped forward to lift the curtain for him. Yao Wenyu bowed in thanks, and Qiao Tianya entered to wheel him away. As everyone filed out of the study, Zhou Gui jogged down the corridor, panting for breath as he called out to Kong Ling.

“Goodness… Oh!” Zhou Gui rubbed his chest with one hand and reached out with the other. “Chengfeng, Chengfeng!”

Kong Ling pulled to a halt. “Why didn’t you stop me earlier if you have something to say? The walkway is slippery. If you fall and break a bone

now, you'll be on bedrest for a hundred days!"

Panting for breath, Zhou Gui flapped a hand. "I could still run a mile or more along the farm fields the year before last, but I've got to admit defeat this year. The storms of life and strife do make one age prematurely."

"Why are you in such a rush?" Kong Ling pulled his fur collar closer around his neck to keep out the biting wind. "Is it about what happened earlier?"

"It's been so long since I last enjoyed the snow with you," Zhou Gui said, clumsily deflecting the question. "My wife has been keeping a close eye on me these days, and I've been looking after my grandson all day inside. Why not come out with me today?"

Kong Ling sighed. "You'd do better not to try to be as furtive as the others." He drew his hands into his sleeves and turned his back to the wind before continuing, "There's no need to persuade me. I won't change my opinion."

"Still, don't let this breed any resentment between you and Yuanzhuo."

"Do you take me for a child?" Kong Ling walked side by side with him. "That Yuanzhuo can speak so frankly shows he has a clear conscience. Some differences in political views are inevitable; mindless echoing is much more worrisome. I understand that, as does Yuanzhuo. Given that the prefectural governor didn't seek us out for a private discussion, clearly that's his stance on the matter as well."

Zhou Gui had been castigating himself ever since the incident with Gao Zhongxiong, in which the scholar had been mistreated by members of the yamen under Zhou Gui's own administration. He no longer dared to make big decisions on his own; he always asked Shen Zechuan before taking

action. During recent discussions, he had reminded the advisors below him not to grow smug or complacent, fearing they would clash next with Yao Wenyu.

Zhou Gui watched as the broken branch of a withered willow tree in the courtyard was blown into the snow and over to the far wall of the yard. Having caught his breath, he said dispiritedly, “I’m just afraid it will estrange us from—”

“Water that’s too clear begets no fish.” Kong Ling raised a hand to brush snow from his hair. He schooled his expression to seriousness. “Is there any hall of government in the world that’s truly transparent? You’ve been the prefect of Cizhou all these years; you know the upper and lower echelons both have their twists and turns. Vices like corruption and bribery are everywhere; they can never be fully rooted out. You’ve done well managing it in previous years. Don’t you think the prefectural governor sees that? From start to finish, he’s never blamed you or treated you worse because of it. Killing those two advisors was a reminder to you, not a warning. Your tiptoeing around and excessive caution will only serve as a constant reminder to *him*.”

The governance of one’s subordinates was a delicate dance, as was deference to one’s superiors.

Zhou Gui walked a few steps in silence, then said despondently, “Years ago, my father-in-law was reluctant to recommend me for an official post in the capital because he thought I wasn’t cut out for it. I have a rather blunt sense when it comes to certain matters, and have no choice but to fumble my way through by trial and error. It’s too difficult.”

“You’ve done nothing against your conscience, so what are you so terrified of?” Kong Ling shook his head slightly. “You needn’t go so out of your way to yield to Yuanzhuo either. Yuanzhuo, the prefectural governor—they’re both intelligent men whose sharp eyes see through everything. How did you think these little concessions of yours would escape their notice? If you keep this up, you’ll only create a genuine rift.”

The wind picked up as Shen Zechuan made his way back to his residence. Fei Sheng held up an umbrella to shield him, but Shen Zechuan’s overcoat flapped in the wind all the same.

Turning his back to the gale, Fei Sheng said, “Master, we should get a sedan too.”

Shen Zechuan could barely open his eyes in the wind, and the cold had already turned the tips of his ears red. “It’s only a few steps; what would we need a sedan for?”

But it’s freezing! Fei Sheng thought. He was worried those so-called *few steps* would make Shen Zechuan ill yet again. Fei Sheng had been exceedingly careful these past few days both indoors and out, hanging thick, heavy curtains in the doorway and even around the veranda under the eaves. When the attendants crossed the threshold, they were instructed to tuck the curtain tight around the doorframe to keep out the draft. For prudence’s sake, the furnace that circulated warm air beneath the floors was also kept burning at all hours.

When they finally made it through the main entrance, Ding Tao sprang out from the side room where he’d been waiting. Li Xiong followed, and the two positioned themselves in front of Shen Zechuan like a living wall.

As they shuffled along, Shen Zechuan said, a little exasperated, “Stop this. Inside, both of you. All you’re getting standing out here is a draft of bitter wind. It won’t be long before you both get sick.”

Ding Tao had grown taller again in recent days. “Master’s instruction was to shield you so no draft can pass through, or he’s gonna beat me.” He patted Li Xiong and shouted against the wind, “Big Bear, move faster!”

By the time Shen Zechuan reached the veranda, his cloak was sodden with snow. It felt heavy and wet around his neck, so he unfastened the ties. Fei Sheng hastened to take it from him and called for a maidservant to hang it up to dry. In the next moment he was reaching to drape a new cloak over Shen Zechuan, but Shen Zechuan simply strode ahead without a glance back.

Fei Sheng had been in a state of elation since receiving the assignment to recruit new soldiers back in Dunzhou. Upon his return, he was even happy to see Qiao Tianya again. While Shen Zechuan was away in Libei for the new year, Fei Sheng had remained at home with Ji Gang, furthering his understanding of the Ji Clan’s boxing style and doing whatever Ji Gang asked of him. Now that Shen Zechuan had returned, Fei Sheng was like a mother hen, taking meticulous care of him in every way possible.

The marquis is busy on the battlefield now!

Fei Sheng was all too aware of this as he followed a few steps behind Shen Zechuan. So long as the prefectural governor didn’t fall sick, the marquis would be happy. And so long as the marquis was happy, his good humor would extend to Fei Sheng. They were all going to be working together now, so Fei Sheng figured Xiao Chiye would have to recognize him eventually.

Shen Zechuan entered the main hall and huffed warmth into his hands as he took his seat. Fei Sheng said, “Master, the medicine has been simmering over the stove. Will you drink it now?”

He certainly didn’t want to. He hadn’t been ill for the past few days and was growing concerned he might get a nosebleed from overnourishment with all these herbs and tonics. Moreover, no one aside from Ding Tao kept candies at the ready to chase the bitterness. Thus Shen Zechuan continued to flip through the documents on his table as if he hadn’t heard.

Met with no response, Fei Sheng hovered in silence. After a short interval, he spoke up again. “Master, the medicine—”

Shen Zechuan glanced up at him, his narrowed eyes betraying his thinning patience. Fei Sheng pretended not to comprehend the meaning of that look. The medicine was a sticking point for both Xiao Chiye and Ji Gang, neither of whom Shen Zechuan could afford to cross.

“Fine,” Shen Zechuan said, relenting. “Bring it over.”

Fei Sheng didn’t need to be told twice; he stepped out at once to fetch the medicine. But a moment later, it was Qiao Tianya who lifted the curtain.

“Yan Heru is here.” Curtain raised, Qiao Tianya turned to glance behind him. “I saw that babbling brat running toward Yuanzhuo making a ruckus, so I brought him over here instead.”

Shen Zechuan dipped his brush in ink. “He’s here to give us money. Treat him with a little more courtesy.”

They were still speaking when a figure darted in under the drapes. Yan Heru was decked out from head to toe in new brocade robes of vivid red trimmed everywhere with gold thread and embroidered with patterns of—

unsurprisingly—gold ingots. On the string around his neck hung a brand new abacus, so heavy it left a red mark where the cord pressed into the skin at the back of his neck. Even so, he couldn't bear to take it off.

The young man's face was soft and fair, and his eyes curved into crescents as he exclaimed, "I'm here to extend my first greetings of the year to Your Lordship! Happy New Year! I would've come to pay my respects earlier, but it turns out you were in Libei! See, the moment you came back, I rushed right over. Not only have I got some choice gems and jades for the marquis, I also brought Your Lordship a number of pretty little bo—"

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Fei Sheng, who had come up behind Yan Heru with the bowl of medicine, locked eyes with Qiao Tianya across the threshold. Qiao Tianya immediately pushed Yan Heru's head down with one broad palm to shut him up.

Libei was deep in mourning, and Cizhou had not hung any elaborate decorations along its streets for this year's festivities either. Both Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye had donned plain clothes of rough fabric; Shen Zechuan had even removed his jade earring for the mourning period. Who could have expected the first words out of Yan Heru's mouth to be so insufferable? He was practically asking for a beating.

Shen Zechuan wrote *Rejected* on the paper that sat before him and didn't spare Yan Heru a glance.

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Chapter 193:
Wary

YAN HERU CORRECTED course at the last minute. “—pretty little baubles!”

“How good of you to have prepared a gift.” Only then did Shen Zechuan set down his brush. “Show Young Master Yan to a seat.”

Qiao Tianya removed his hand, and Fei Sheng ushered Yan Heru in, saying, “Quickly, now. Some tea for Young Master Yan!”

Yan Heru had suffered an enormous financial loss this time. He had carefully selected a number of exceedingly good-looking boys and girls from Cuiqing. He’d originally intended to get on Yao Wenyu’s good side by letting him have first pick and thus pave the way for his dealings with Shen Zechuan. But he’d been denied so much as a glimpse of Yao Wenyu’s face. On entering this courtyard, he’d then thought to give them to Shen Zechuan instead. After all, what kind of man didn’t love a pretty little thing? It wasn’t as if Xiao Er was some otherworldly beauty that put flowers to shame.

Rubbing the back of his head, Yan Heru marked Qiao Tianya down in his book of grudges, then lifted the hem of his robes to take his seat. He still wore an amiable expression, but his smile was more restrained now. “Ah, the Prince of Libei was really a legend of our age. Who doesn’t know of his amazing feats on the battlefield, no? I was simply worried the prefectural governor and marquis would be overcome with grief. If you got sick from it, you would be staining the memory of the late prince, who cared so much for

his children. See, *that's* why I rushed over here playing the boor—to coax a smile out of the governor! My deepest condolences, Your Lordship."

Yan Heru spoke the official dialect with a hint of Hezhou accent. He couldn't seem to shed his habit of adding *see, yes, no?* and other little interjections, which made his speech sweet and childlike. When he spoke those words of comfort in his lilting tone, he sounded almost genuine.

Shen Zechuan accepted his kindness. After all, he had accrued massive expenses all over the territory this past year and was depending on Yan Heru for all of them. Shen Zechuan let Yan Heru speak while he took the medicine from Fei Sheng and drank a few sips. Expression gentle, he said, "When I was in Libei, I heard you aided Border Camp with tens of thousands of silver taels to build their roads."

"Aw, that was chump change," Yan Heru said. "Nothing for the governor to worry about. Besides, we're all on the same side now, yes? Everything Libei and Qidong do is for the sake of fighting those Biansha baldies. I'm just a little merchant who can't help any other way. Consider it a small gesture of my goodwill."

Fei Sheng scoffed to himself. This lad was as good as Fei Sheng himself at pretending to be a decent human being. Here he was going on and on about being on the same side, yet he hadn't shown the slightest twinge of guilt back in Dunzhou when he and his merchants were discovered trading with Biansha.

Shen Zechuan finished his medicine and said after a moment's pause, "Was there a particular reason for your visit today?"

"I just wanted to see for myself that Your Lordship is well, that's all." Once again, Yan Heru flashed a smile. "Your Lordship is like my own

brother. If I go a day without clapping eyes on you, I miss you like crazy." Even as the words rolled off his tongue, he impulsively straightened in his seat and said, "You know, maybe Your Lordship would take me as your younger brother? I can get down and kowtow to you now."

Shameless creature that he was, Yan Heru had addressed Cai Yu as *Pa* and Lei Changming as *Dage*, and he even called Lei Jingzhe *nephew* whenever he saw him. Now that the game had changed and Shen Zechuan was in control of the board, he hoped to slide into position as Shen Zechuan's little brother. So what if it meant being his subservient hanger-on, his lowly minion? All of that was insignificant compared to money—Yan Heru saw that more clearly than anyone.

"Sure." Noting Yan Heru's good mood, Shen Zechuan humored him. "Kowtow twice to Shen Wei, and we'll be part of the same clan."

Yan Heru almost spat on the ground. He was no fool. Any association with Shen Wei would be an instant blow to his reputation; he would be cursed in both the east and west. He beat a hasty retreat. "Oh, never mind. My family's got rules. Kowtowing to Shen Wei is out of the question." After a beat, he turned to Shen Zechuan again, dragging out his words. "Your Lordship. Hey…Your Lordship."

"Hm?"

Yan Heru perked up. "Well…since I'm here, I have something else to discuss with you. Qidong has come to an agreement with our Cizhou, right? There'll be no problem with the marshal's military provisions this year. I'll take care of it. All of it."

Shen Zechuan took a sip of tea to rinse his mouth, in no hurry to respond.

Sure enough, Yan Heru prattled on. “Qudu fears you now. You’re surrounded by powerful military forces. If you really came to blows with the capital, how would the Eight Great Battalions stand a chance? But it’s unlikely they’ll just take it lying down. I’m thinking Qudu will cut off our trade with Juexi this year. At the very least, they’ll try to take the Xi Clan’s copper mines and fleet of merchant ships off your hands.”

The Xi Clan’s ships in the Port of Yongyi were essential to Cizhou’s business with the Huiyan tribe at Libei’s trade market. The coarse tea Shen Zechuan’s people bought there was worth nothing in Juexi; a profit could only be made by shipping it overseas. Yan Heru cared not a bit about the seizure of the Xi Clan’s properties. Those weren’t his shops or his ships. What concerned him was the loss of the Yan Clan’s grain business in Zhongbo. He had to find something to fill this void, and he had his eye on the port.

“What did you have in mind?” Shen Zechuan set down the lid of his teacup. “Out with it.”

Yan Heru plopped his elbows down on the table “I think we should let them have the Port of Yongyi.”

Fingers resting on the teacup lid, Shen Zechuan glanced up. Yan Heru’s eyes gleamed with ambition. Shen Zechuan didn’t reply immediately. He sat patiently, and within a few moments, he had figured out Yan Heru’s plan.

Yan Heru blinked coyly. “We can always build a new one, no?”

The Yan Clan of Hezhou occupied the inland waterways throughout the south of the Zhou empire, which allowed them to do business all over the land. But once their goods arrived in Juexi, they had to hand them over to the Xi Clan’s fleet at the Port of Yongyi for trading overseas. The lion’s share of

the profits from this trade route went not into Yan Heru's pockets, but Xi Hongxuan's—or rather, now, Shen Zechuan's. Yan Heru had been attempting to cozy up to Shen Zechuan all this while, making all kinds of brazen offers to collaborate, because he saw the consolidation of trade routes all over the country. Shen Zechuan moved quickly. If Yan Heru wished to compete, he had to keep up. For Yan Heru, the threat of Juexi seizing the copper mines and shutting down the Port of Yongyi was a golden opportunity to gain some ground.

When Yan Heru had first ventured up north a few years ago, he'd faced a number of setbacks. Libei refused to do business with him, so he'd established a smaller trade market in Dunzhou and made use of the brokerage to launder money for officials from all over the land. It was the same now—and he was just as gutsy as he'd been then. Giving up the Port of Yongyi meant the Xi Clan would no longer obstruct the Yan Clan in the west. Yan Heru wanted firm control over both inland and overseas water routes so he could stand on equal footing with Shen Zechuan in these turbulent times.

Shen Zechuan brushed the edge of the lid with his fingertips as he contemplated. "How are you going to get around Jiang Qingshan?"

"Why would I need to when Your Lordship has so much leverage against Juexi's officials in your hands?" Yan Heru grinned boyishly, revealing his sharp little canines. "Remember all those merchants who traveled to Dunzhou to launder money on behalf of one official or another? Well, there are plenty of officials from Juexi among the names recorded. If the brokerage's account books fall into Jiang Qingshan's hands, there'll be hell to pay—that's *if* the officials make it out alive. I shoveled unbelievable amounts

of bribe money into Juexi just to gain access to the market there. Now it’s time for me to collect on that debt.”

There were hundreds of officials and lesser functionaries in any given region. Even if the prefectural governor himself was upright and fair, he couldn’t guarantee all the subordinates under him were clean. The administration of cities and prefectures was complex and tedious work, and there were only so many men working the investigating censors circuit. There were blind spots from top to bottom, all of them openings for Yan Heru to exploit. He could do business on such a large scale in Juexi, right next to the Xi Clan, because the men on the local government’s payroll were his own personal subjects who had successfully protected him. Now those same men would become the stepping stones that paved his way forward.

Shen Zechuan found himself re-evaluating Yan Heru yet again.

The young man had been shameless from the moment they’d met in Dunzhou. Even when Shen Zechuan had continued to give him the cold shoulder, he’d persisted with a broad smile. It was easy to forget he was the helmsman of the Yan Clan of Hezhou, the same family that had profited tremendously from the Zhongbo tragedy just a few years ago. He’d been quick to cast Lei Jingzhe aside and had even been willing to trap and kill him in Dunzhou just to win Shen Zechuan over.

No matter how sweetly Yan Heru addressed someone, he wouldn’t waver for a moment when it came to taking their life. He was truly a money-grubber, famous for his refusal to go out without a golden carriage. He wouldn’t even show his face at the bargaining table if the party sitting across from him didn’t have enough to offer.

“Liuzhou, out along the coast, is the perfect place. It’s pretty remote, and it lies quite a ways from the Port of Yongyi. What’s more, it has a crescent-shaped bay, so the ships won’t be exposed to the open sea. As long as we can keep You Tan—Liuzhou’s prefect—quiet, we’re in business.” Yan Heru rapped his golden abacus. “Make good use of the records from the brokerage, and the merchants we send through Juexi won’t need to pay taxes to Jiang Qingshan. When that happens, Your Lordship can have final say over the tariffs and inland commercial tax. Once you reign supreme and take all thirteen cities of Juexi, these corrupt officials can be my little housewarming present. Wash the land in their blood, and then we’ll see who still dares take bribes on your watch!”

He wanted to drain every last drop from this resource and dispense with it the second it was no longer useful. Yan Heru hadn’t even come of age, yet he was already well-acquainted with the words *ruthless* and *merciless*. Sporting that innocent face, he clacked away on his little abacus. What he calculated out was not just money, but lives.

Shen Zechuan had no reason to reject Yan Heru’s proposal—indeed, he needed a new port if he hoped to go around Jiang Qingshan. He wasn’t willing to concede the copper mines either. All his expenses were increasing this year due to the war. By the time he recovered the remaining three prefectures of Zhongbo, the bill would no doubt have multiplied again.

“How farsighted you are,” Shen Zechuan said, affecting wonder. “It seems I still can’t compare to you in these matters of business.”

After Yan Heru took his leave, Qiao Tianya leaned a hand on the chair’s armrest and watched the door’s hanging screen fall. “Some people need killing.”

“He’s resourceful, and he knows how to get on someone’s good side.” Shen Zechuan also watched the screen sway gently. “In time, he’ll be more trouble than he’s worth.”

Yan Heru strode out of the residence and stepped on his steward’s bent back to board his carriage. As the carriage lurched forward, he removed the golden abacus and tossed it onto a satin cushion. Rubbing the back of his neck, he asked, “Have you found Haerigu?”

A man lifted the curtain and slipped inside. He knelt and said, “Everyone in the Shen manor keeps their mouth shut tight, and the place is filled with the Embroidered Uniform Guard. I couldn’t find any trace of him.”

Yan Heru rattled the beads on his abacus, vexed. “What Embroidered Uniform Guard? A bunch of beggars from Qudu who hung up their hats to become lapdogs in Cizhou! Shen Zechuan is wary of me after I mentioned the port in Liuzhou today. Who knows? He’s probably plotting my death right this second.”

The man, Yan Miao, had come from the brokerage in Dunzhou. He was the son of a servant whose whole family served the Yan Clan, and acted as the broker who handled all incoming and outgoing accounts. Yan Heru had stationed him in Dunzhou a few years ago and trusted him immensely.

In the dim light, Yan Miao raised his head slightly. “From what I can see of Shen Zechuan’s activities in Cizhou, he’s not as vindictive as the rumors say. The war is urgent now, and both the northern and southern battlefronts are reliant on him for resources. We mustn’t act rashly and ruin our relationship with him.”

“He’s having me cover two prefectures’ granaries at the start of spring.” Yan Heru flicked the abacus beads back and forth. “Is that not a warning? You think he isn’t someone who’ll seek revenge over small details? Think again.”

“Kong Chengfeng rejected him thrice, yet he never flew into a rage. He’s continued to treat him with respect,” Yan Miao said. “We’re supplying grain for two prefectures, along with Qidong’s military provisions this year. We’ll also front the funds and labor for the construction of a new port in the west. He ought to recognize Xiao-Gongzi’s sincerity.”

Yan Heru suddenly swept the abacus off his lap. He sat in frustrated silence for a moment before bursting out, “A-Miao, you don’t get it. Shen Zechuan treats Kong Ling well because Kong Ling is willing to work for the good of Cizhou despite not wanting to answer to Shen Zechuan as a subordinate. It was Kong Ling who negotiated with Huaizhou at the beginning of autumn, and it was also Kong Ling who played peacemaker when Shen Zechuan and Zhou Gui’s advisors nearly fell out at the end of the year. How else do you think a blockhead like Zhou Gui can remain the prefect of Cizhou? Shen Zechuan is making the most of his resources. He knows that little two-man team won’t turn against him; they’ll build an unassailable fortress around Cizhou on his behalf. As for me, if he genuinely wanted to keep me as a partner for the long haul, why would he tolerate his lapdogs barking at me time and time again?”

He would have said more, but Yan Miao straightened and warned in a low voice, “Xiao-Gongzi!”

Yan Heru paused. Straining to listen, he caught the clatter of hooves outside the carriage. He retrieved his abacus, then crawled over to the curtain

and dropped his voice to a whisper. “Who’s that?”

“The Libei Armored Cavalry,” Yan Miao answered.

A pang of fear shot through Yan Heru. He clutched his abacus to his chest in the swaying carriage. He was just screwing up his courage to take a peek when the carriage came to an abrupt stop.

Snowcrest, dark against the blanket of billowing snow, had slowed to a halt alongside the carriage. Xiao Chiye cracked his whip, and Chen Yang and the Libei Armored Cavalry behind him followed suit and halted too.

Yan Heru patted his cheeks with both hands, then pulled the carriage curtains open. “I thought it might be the second master! I was just thinking of you,” he said warmly.

Xiao Chiye swept a glance over Yan Miao kneeling inside before fixing his gaze on Yan Heru. “You’ve been to see the governor?”

Yan Heru gulped. He’d heard Xiao Chiye had run in the snow for half the night in order to retrieve the Prince of Libei, and that not only did he not freeze to death, he broke the necks of a dozen men when he got there. Yan Heru didn’t know if it was because of these rumors, but he felt Xiao Chiye’s presence suddenly had a new weight to it. The imposing aura that assailed him was so overwhelming he broke into a light sweat.

“I did, yes.” Yan Heru looked as though he was overheating as he dabbed at his forehead. “I left some gems and jades for the second master. If you like the look of them, let me know. There are plenty more in Hezhou.”

Xiao Chiye had just come from Border Camp and had no desire to engage in idle chatter with Yan Heru, so he merely nodded and left with his

men. The Libei Armored Cavalry swept past like the wind. Only when they were gone did Yan Heru dare to rub his arms and shudder.

Recalling something, Yan Miao commented, “The second master has been looking for the Venerable Master Yideng for a while now.”

“Is that so?” Yan Heru tilted his head to watch the fine spray of snow kicked up by the cavalry. His gaze sharpened, and he said with a smile, “But to me, keeping Shen Zechuan sick is a lot better than letting him recover.”

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Chapter 194:
Sound Sleep

QIAO TIANYA REMAINED in the room, waiting for the rest of Shen Zechuan's instructions.

"Tell Yuanzhuo about the new port in Liuzhou when

you go back," Shen Zechuan said. "We'll discuss it in detail later. The weather's been cold lately. Keep the under-floor furnaces running. Don't let him fall ill again."

More at ease with Shen Zechuan than Fei Sheng was, Qiao Tianya answered simply, "I've been keeping an eye on it."

Shen Zechuan thought for a moment. "Quite a lot of people have come calling this year seeking a career and future in our court. Ward them off for a few more days until Yuanzhuo recovers from his illness. You did well today. Yan Heru has ulterior motives; don't let him in next time either."

Qiao Tianya fished out a folded-up booklet from his sleeve and pushed it before Shen Zechuan. "That's why I'm here, actually. There are a good number of reputable scholars among those who've come calling. Yuanzhuo has already gone through them and prepared two lists of names."

"Two?" With warm fingertips, Shen Zechuan opened the booklet for a look.

"This is a list of those you can retain but cannot use." Qiao Tianya gestured at the right side, then the left. "While this is a list of those you can retain *and* use."

Shen Zechuan looked over the right-hand list. They were all scholars with good reputations. What Zhongbo most needed at present were practical doers who could see things through; in that regard, few of these were useful to him. Yet these people had come from afar to throw in their lot with Shen Zechuan. For the sake of his own reputation, Shen Zechuan couldn't afford to slight them either. He would have to house them in his manor and keep them on as literary retainers.

In contrast, those of use in the left-hand list were nearly all unknowns.

"We'll need a new cohort this spring," Shen Zechuan said. "When the time comes, include the talents Zhou Gui picked out and draw up a list for each prefecture."

Shen Zechuan intended to reclaim Zhongbo's remaining three prefectures by spring. If they missed the spring plowing, he would have to worry over provisions again at the end of the year.

Qiao Tianya acknowledged the order. Upon hearing the tread of footsteps on the walkway outside, he rose and announced with a smile, "Er-ye is back."

After Xiao Fangxu's demise, Xiao Jiming had become the Prince of Libei. Calling Xiao Chiye *Er-gongzi*—Second Young Master—was no longer appropriate. Everyone now addressed him as *Er-ye*—the second master after Xiao Jiming, who was now the head of the clan.

Xiao Chiye paused under the eaves while Chen Yang and Gu Jin relieved him of his cloak. A maidservant presented a hot handkerchief for him to wipe his hands, and Ding Tao quickly lifted the hanging screen for Xiao Chiye to enter.

Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng tactfully made to retreat, but Xiao Chiye stopped them. “Where’s Haerigu?”

Fei Sheng cast a sidelong glance at Shen Zechuan, answering only when he saw Shen Zechuan’s subtle nod. “Er-ye, he’s at our Beiyuan Training Grounds.” He bent to take the handkerchief from Xiao Chiye as he continued, “Master made arrangements for the Embroidered Uniform Guard to do a daily headcount to prevent his Scorpions from running all over the place.”

“Gu Jin,” Xiao Chiye said over his shoulder, “make a trip to the Beiyuan Training Grounds later to see Haerigu.”

Since Shen Zechuan was listening, Fei Sheng didn’t question this. He bowed again to Xiao Chiye and withdrew with Qiao Tianya. As guards, they couldn’t very well stand under the eaves and chatter where their masters could hear. By silent agreement, everyone moved to the veranda at the other side of the courtyard to talk.

The interior of the room was warm. Xiao Chiye removed his blade and undressed, and Shen Zechuan gazed up at him from his chair. Xiao Chiye had ridden nonstop from the front lines to Border Camp, then from Border Camp to Zhongbo, yet he found it all worth it upon seeing the expression in Shen Zechuan’s eyes. He leaned over, his body blocking the chair from the view of anyone in the doorway. “You’ve gotten thinner.”

Shen Zechuan, still holding the brush, caressed its smooth shaft and whispered back, feigning ignorance, “Thinner where?”

Xiao Chiye cupped Shen Zechuan’s chin to keep him from shying away, then pressed him into the chair for a kiss.

Shen Zechuan tilted his head back, exposing his elegant throat as he faced all of Xiao Chiye’s iciness and melted it with his gaze. Abandoning the

brush, he slid his hands up Xiao Chiye’s arms and wound them around his neck as Xiao Chiye scooped him up.

This kiss contained no consolation, a sentiment that could be bestowed on them by others. The insatiable desire laid bare as they reached for each other was who they really were, the taste of their tongues unique to this pair of lovers. Xiao Chiye craved such interdependence, both secretive and extreme. This was where he belonged—his territory.

Shen Zechuan was burning up from the kiss. Xiao Chiye set him on the table. Bracing a hand on either side of his hips, Xiao Chiye gazed at him with all the seriousness he could muster. It didn’t take long for the flush to spread from Shen Zechuan’s earlobes to the corners of his eyes. He seemed as if he couldn’t bear Xiao Chiye any longer, couldn’t endure such an invasive gaze. This seduction was a different kind of devastation.

Despite being intimately familiar with one another—even with their eyes closed, they could find each other’s most sensitive spots—in this moment, Shen Zechuan could feel his heartstrings stirring just from the tantalizing promise in Xiao Chiye’s eyes. His breathing quickened, and tiny beads of sweat glided along the satiny skin of his back.

Xiao Chiye looked so very dangerous, as if he would ravage Shen Zechuan like a tempest the moment he was freed of whatever shackles held him back. He needed Shen Zechuan far too much, yet he was unusually restrained. His desire surged like magma beneath a thin layer of ice. In Xiao Chiye’s regard, Shen Zechuan sensed a love so intense, so ardent, that it could crush him in its grip.

This was the look of desire suppressed.

Slowly, Xiao Chiye kissed Shen Zechuan. He took off his outer robe and flung it over a chair. “I’m going to the bath.”

Shen Zechuan brushed fine sweat off Xiao Chiye’s jaw with one fingertip, then pulled away and blinked, motioning for him to go ahead.

When Xiao Chiye reappeared, he had changed into fresh clothes. He was drying his hair in the inner chamber when he spotted a small box on the table. Inside were the gems and jades Yan Heru had sent.

In the exterior chamber, Chen Yang was talking to Shen Zechuan. “I have to return to Border Camp in three days, but Master will stay.”

Shen Zechuan seemed to be looking over the documents on the table and was slow to answer. “The second month is approaching. Has the location for the new stables on Mount Luo been decided?”

Xiao Chiye plucked up a piece of red jade and caressed it.

“Yes,” Chen Yang answered. “Once we reclaim Duanzhou, we can begin construction.”

“The new spears General Lu wants should be ready by the end of the second month,” Shen Zechuan said. “When the time comes, we’ll send them directly via the new road.”

The rest of their talk all revolved around tedious duties. As Xiao Chiye listened, he recalled the defensive battle he’d fought a few days back.

The Imperial Army had been stationed at Second Sand Camp, where Xiao Chiye had taken command in Jiang Sheng’s place. Guo Weili and Zhao Hui had both been transferred back to their original camps, while Zuo Qianqiu and Lu Guangbai were jointly overseeing First Sand Camp. Xiao

Jiming's intent with this arrangement was obvious: The Libei Armored Cavalry had given up advancing and was now relying on the two men most skilled at defense to hold the front line against Hassen's attacks. Libei had gone completely on the defensive.

Not only that, Xiao Jiming had made changes to troop organization. In the past, a change of general meant their entire command moved with them—all the soldiers had to be transferred between camps. It was different now. Other than Zuo Qianqiu, who remained in place at First Sand Camp, the other three commanding generals rotated at irregular intervals.

This gave Guo Weili a splitting headache. The men he was used to leading would no longer be under his command, and Zuo Qianqiu was there looking over his shoulder during defensive battles. The chain around his neck had shortened so much it was strangling him, chafing him terribly. Meanwhile, Xiao Chiye had to break away from the Imperial Army and adapt to the armored cavalry of the remaining two camps. It posed an even bigger challenge for Lu Guangbai, who had to familiarize himself with leading a cavalry after years of being an infantryman stuck to the ground. Everyone was crashing into one another as if they were bound hand and foot, unaccustomed to this new way of fighting.

But the benefits were immediately apparent.

Since the commanders rotated in random order, Hassen could never be sure whom his opponent would be when he launched an attack. The morale of the Libei Armored Cavalry was low after the loss of Xiao Fangxu, but they did not collapse as the Biansha Horsemen had hoped. Hassen not only faced Zuo Qianqiu, who'd famously stood guard at Tianfei Watchtower, but also had to watch out for the infantry from Bianjun Commandery, who could

conceal themselves in the snow. Hassen had no idea what had happened within Libei behind that iron wall, except that the swift victory he'd expected never came. Both parties instead fell into a stalemate even more tense than before. It was only now that Hassen finally got a taste of how formidable Xiao Jiming truly was. The new Prince of Libei was entirely unlike Xiao Fangxu. He seemed to have cowered away and holed himself up in Libei's homeland, but in reality, he had drawn a hard line on the eastern front, making it impossible for Hassen to gain even an inch.

Xiao Chiye shook off his distraction and closed the box.

Chen Yang had taken his leave, and Shen Zechuan was still writing at the table. The rustle of ink and brush blended into the whisper of falling snow. Xiao Chiye didn't go out and disturb him. He knew Shen Zechuan was in a rush to take down King Yi before the second month, and that the advisors were waiting for him in Zhou Gui's study to discuss the deployment of troops. Xiao Chiye set his towel aside and fell back onto the rumpled bedding.

Shen Zechuan hadn't let the maidservants make the bed when he was woken the night before. Xiao Chiye wondered if it was intentional. He could still imagine a whiff of Shen Zechuan's scent as he nestled under the covers. It left him instantly relaxed, dispelling the heavy mood that had shadowed him since leaving the battlefield.

Xiao Chiye closed his eyes and fell asleep before his hair had even dried.

When Fei Sheng came to call Shen Zechuan in the late afternoon, he at last extracted himself from his work.

“Open the windows. It’s rather stuffy,” he instructed Fei Sheng. As he rose, he remembered something and added, “Never mind, wait for me at the door.”

Fei Sheng bowed and retreated.

The back of Shen Zechuan’s neck was aching from bending over the desk too long. He lifted the hanging screen to the inner chamber and heard Xiao Chiye’s steady breathing.

Xiao Chiye lay on his side, face half buried in the bedding. He had fallen into the deep sleep of the truly exhausted. The injury on his shoulder had yet to fully heal, but he seemed to feel nothing, though he had his full weight on it. Afraid he would aggravate it lying on it like this, Shen Zechuan gently tugged at the back of Xiao Chiye’s collar for a look, but even that slight force tipped him over onto his stomach.

Smothered in the blankets, Xiao Chiye surfaced groggily from sleep, sprawled on the bed. He murmured without opening his eyes, “Military report…”

Shen Zechuan leaned close to Xiao Chiye’s ear. “No reports. Go back to sleep.”

Xiao Chiye turned his face to the side to breathe. Shen Zechuan wiped his sweat for him, his fingers exceedingly gentle as they moved over his brow. Xiao Chiye grabbed his hand and held tight, refusing to let it go.

“I won’t be long,” Shen Zechuan murmured.

Whenever he used to speak in this tone back in Qudu, chances were he was trying to get under Xiao Chiye’s skin. But now, the way he said it was so

light and gentle, like the downy caress of a feather. Not even a hundred Yan Herus with their lilting accents could hold a candle to him.

But Xiao Chiye did not let go.

Fei Sheng waited quite a while at the door. It was growing dark, and he feared if they delayed any further, the snowstorm would get heavier, and Shen Zechuan would catch a cold. He ducked back in and called softly from the other side of the hanging screen, “Master, it’s time to go.”

After a moment’s pause, Shen Zechuan replied, “Go stop Yuanzhuo from heading over to the Zhou manor; tell him to come straight here instead. Then send someone to invite Zhou Gui and Chengfeng over.”

Fei Sheng understood that he meant to hold the discussion at home tonight. “Then, shall I guide the gentlemen to the side hall?”

Shen Zechuan sat at the edge of the bed in the dimness—the lamps were still unlit. “Let’s just talk in the outside chamber here. We’ll keep our voices down.”

Fei Sheng nodded and took his leave, aware that the operative phrase was *keep our voices down*. Hence, before the gentlemen arrived, he called for his subordinates to quietly set up a screen in the outer chamber, partitioning off a corner of the room for their conversation.

Finding the room empty upon entering, Zhou Gui and Kong Ling looked at each other in puzzlement. Fei Sheng hurriedly led them behind the screen. Voice low, he said, “My master’s in the inner chamber.”

“Er-ye too?” Kong Ling asked, lowering his voice to match.

Fei Sheng nodded slightly. Just to be safe, he added, “He’s sleeping.”

They were brewing the tea when Qiao Tianya wheeled Yao Wenyu in. Fei Sheng had laid out a rug to keep the wheelchair from making noise when it entered. Watching, Kong Ling couldn't help chuckling at Fei Sheng's enterprising talent of ingratiating himself.

Yao Wenyu didn't inquire about Shen Zechuan's whereabouts. Handling the teacup with care so as not to make any noise, he said, "Shenwei's declaration of war against King Yi was published today. We can expect activity from Fanzhou soon; I'll have to trouble Your Excellency to keep a close eye on the matter."

None of the three had naturally loud voices, so they were all at ease murmuring behind the screen. Zhou Gui nodded. "Fanzhou is surrounded. King Yi and Mount Luo have reached no agreement, and his troops are too weak to mount any true resistance. I don't imagine he's one to fight to the death; he'll definitely attempt to bargain with us."

"It would be best if we didn't have to fight." As someone who had suffered the ravages of war, Kong Ling would rather exhaust every diplomatic word before drawing any blade. "King Yi made lofty promises to the citizens of Fanzhou during his rise, yet to this day, he has not delivered on a single one. If he has any self-awareness, he should realize how powerless he is to resist."

"Even if King Yi himself is willing, the men under him might not be." Yao Wenyu thought for a moment longer. "Fanzhou and Dengzhou, which King Yi has claimed, both have a major bandit problem, even worse than it was in Chazhou. There's also bound to be interference from the brothels, where Cuiqing and her ilk have been trafficking children from decent families. These people know surrendering is as good as a death sentence."

Shen Zechuan raised his hands to cover Xiao Chiye's ears as he listened to their discussion in the darkness.

Yao Wenyu was right: For both official and personal reasons, Shen Zechuan would never go easy on the bandits or the brothels. These people were the root of the corruption in Zhongbo's two southern prefectures. Allowing a scourge like this to survive would merely hinder the prefectures' progress. Shen Zechuan would exterminate them without hesitation, and they knew it.

"What if we offer them a pardon when our troops are at their gates?" Zhou Gui put in. "Then make the arrests once the gates are open?"

Kong Ling shook his head, passing Zhou Gui a teacup as he did. "Have you considered that if someone accuses us of going easy on the bandits and incites the common folk of both prefectures, it will tarnish the governor's reputation?"

In every step he took, Shen Zechuan was treading with caution. Even while scheming to conquer the four corners of the land, it was imperative they took Shen Zechuan's reputation into consideration. In an attempt to overwrite Shen Wei's infamy, every move they had made from Chazhou onward conspicuously proclaimed their benevolence and magnanimity. This was also why they required justification before waging any war, and why they could have no truck with bandits. Otherwise, even if they controlled all of Zhongbo in the future, Shen Zechuan would never establish himself as a virtuous ruler.

Shen Zechuan was still considering their conversation when the crunch of footsteps sounded beneath the eaves. With Fei Sheng gone to the kitchen to call for Shen Zechuan's medicine, there was no one outside to welcome the

newcomer. Gao Zhongxiong, oblivious to the low-voiced discussion taking place inside, patted snow off his shoulders and called out as he entered, “My greetings to Your Lordship. That declaration—”

The three men sitting in the outer chamber turned in unison and shushed him.

Gao Zhongxiong’s cheeks were red from the cold. He went silent at once and shrank his neck back. He was still feeling trepidatious when Zhou Gui beckoned him, but seeing as none of the gentlemen rebuked him, he gingerly tiptoed over and bent down to whisper, “I came to submit my report to His Lordship.”

Unsure how to explain, Kong Ling merely said, “Later. Why don’t you take a seat and have some tea?”

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Chapter 195:
Mastiffs

GAO ZHONGXIONG didn't dare ask any more questions. He primly took a seat off to the side. The cold had nipped him badly on his way here; as he sat in the warmth, sensation returned in his ears that had been frozen numb.

Noting that Gao Zhongxiong wore an old robe, Zhou Gui said, "It's bitterly cold in Cizhou. You're underdressed for this weather."

Gao Zhongxiong looked a little embarrassed. He clutched the hem of his robe and answered in a minuscule voice, "Of course. You're right."

Observant as always, Kong Ling stepped in. "The yamen you work in is a poor one; you're in a far worse position than those in lucrative posts. Any money that passes through your hands is small change. What's more, you've only just arrived in Cizhou. It can't be easy to get settled in a whole new place. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to ask."

His show of concern put Gao Zhongxiong instantly at ease. His eyes misted over, and he hurriedly stood to bow. "You have all shown me utmost solicitude; the governor, especially, has treated me with such tremendous kindness—"

Zhou Gui waved a hand. "Take a seat. There's no one else here tonight; no need to stand on ceremony."

Gao Zhongxiong had no wife, children, or relatives in Cizhou. Given his associations, no one at the yamen dared to let him pick up the tab during their usual social functions. His monthly salary should have been more than

sufficient. What he didn’t dare tell anyone was that all his money had gone to support Han Jin.

Shen Zechuan had released Han Jin from prison the previous autumn and settled him in a side courtyard. The former commissioner of the Eight Great Battalions had suffered greatly in prison. Supplied with adequate meat and wine upon his release, he did nothing but eat and drink to his heart’s content for weeks after gaining his freedom. Shen Zechuan had sent several attendants to the courtyard to take care of his needs, and once he was back in the pink of health, a young servant was even assigned to play with him. The lad took Han Jin along to throw dice and watch cricket fights, keeping him so entertained he soon abandoned himself to pleasure and picked up a gambling habit along the way. In less than two months, he’d forgotten all about returning to Qudu. Feeling cooped up in the courtyard, he began venturing out of the manor with his personal servant, bringing the house down anywhere he went, drinking and carousing without a care in the world.

But Shen Zechuan had allocated only so much money toward Han Jin’s upkeep. Since he couldn’t stop himself from gambling, he had to find the funds somewhere. And so he had set his sights on Gao Zhongxiong. He showed up at Gao Zhongxiong’s house almost every day, shouting “Disloyal turncoat slave!” at the top of his lungs and cornering him to demand money as soon as he set foot outside.

Gao Zhongxiong was helpless to deal with him and embarrassingly low on cash. How would he have money to buy winter clothes?

Within the inner chamber, Shen Zechuan’s fingertips had gone numb in Xiao Chiye’s grasp, though his mind was sharp as ever as he listened to their conversation.

The wind had picked up after dark, sending snow like puffs of cotton dancing through the sky. The wind chimes under the eaves clanked without cease. Fearing the din would disrupt the discussion within, Gu Jin, who had just returned from Beiyuan Training Grounds, called for someone to take them down. As he swept snow from his hair, he saw Fei Sheng approaching from the other end of the walkway.

“Looking for Er-ye?” Hands occupied with the tray holding Shen Zechuan’s medicine, Fei Sheng jerked his chin toward the room. “He’s resting. Master won’t allow us to call for him. The journey’s been tough on all of you.”

“It’s snowing so hard. Riding in this weather will be the death of me.” Gu Jin had only just dismounted, and his ears were so numb from the wind he could feel nothing in them. “Er-ye hasn’t had a decent night’s sleep for the past fortnight.”

Fei Sheng sighed.

Gu Jin stepped aside. “Go on ahead. Don’t hold the governor up from taking his medicine.”

Fei Sheng strode forward, then turned back and said in a hushed tone, “They’re going to be busy inside for quite a while; there’s no need for anyone to stand guard here. When Chen Yang and Qiao Tianya return later, go to the duty room with them and rest. I’ll have some snacks and hot tea sent over so you can have something in your stomachs at least.”

No one knew when Xiao Chiye would wake up, but when he did, he would no doubt want to see them immediately. They’d been on the move for days now, and standing in the bitter wind was nigh unbearable. This was

indeed a thoughtful offer. The duty room was just a stone's throw from the courtyard, and they could dart out in the blink of an eye if they were called.

Gu Jin cupped his fists in thanks for Fei Sheng's kindness and held up the hanging screen for him to enter.

Shen Zechuan had given no order to light the lamps, so Fei Sheng didn't offer. He entered with the tray in hand and ladled the medicine into a porcelain bowl. Yao Wenyu and the rest were still speaking in the outer room at a volume only Shen Zechuan could hear. Shen Zechuan took the spoon in his free hand and sipped slowly.

Fei Sheng had stepped as quietly as possible, but Xiao Chiye still woke up.

Brow furrowed, Xiao Chiye took a moment to orient himself before sitting up in one swift move. His black shadow abruptly enveloped Shen Zechuan, giving Fei Sheng a fright. Blinking away his heavy sleep, Xiao Chiye turned to Shen Zechuan and rasped, "What time is it?"

Shen Zechuan set down his spoon and looked at Fei Sheng.

"Er-ye, it's a few hours since the sun set," Fei Sheng answered.

To Xiao Chiye's surprise, he had slept almost six hours—and he was still holding Shen Zechuan's hand. He rubbed his neck with his free hand. "Is Gu Jin back?"

Fei Sheng collected the bowl and spoon. "Only this moment. They're all in the duty room now. I'll get someone to summon them if Er-ye wishes."

"Go," Xiao Chiye said, rising. "Tell them to meet me in the side hall. I'll be there shortly."

Hearing voices in the inner chamber, the group outside fell quiet. Fei Sheng stepped out with the empty bowl, glanced meaningfully at the gentlemen in the outer chamber, and ducked under the hanging screen to call for someone to summon Chen Yang and the others.

Shen Zechuan flexed his numb fingers, gone red in Xiao Chiye's grip. As Xiao Chiye pulled on his outer robe, he asked, "Have you been sitting here all this time?"

The bitterness of the medicine still pervaded Shen Zechuan's mouth. Thoughts occupied with the situation in Fanzhou, he replied, somewhat distracted, "That's right, my back's aching."

Xiao Chiye poured himself a cup of cooled tea and held it in his mouth as he quickly dressed. When he saw Shen Zechuan get to his feet, he stood in his path, refusing to let him leave. Shen Zechuan raised his eyebrows in question, and Xiao Chiye took hold of his chin.

Shen Zechuan wasn't tall enough to reach Xiao Chiye's lips to begin with, and Xiao Chiye didn't bend down when he held Shen Zechuan's chin. Shen Zechuan was forced to stand on tiptoe as Xiao Chiye kissed him, letting the tea flow onto Shen Zechuan's tongue and sweep away the lingering bitterness. Xiao Chiye drew Shen Zechuan into his arms, and Shen Zechuan gripped Xiao Chiye's sleeves as he plundered Shen Zechuan's mouth until his knees went weak. Unable to hold the tea in his mouth, Shen Zechuan hastily swallowed, only to choke and burst into a fit of coughs.

Those in the outer room had already drunk their fill of tea. Hearing the coughs, Zhou Gui worried Shen Zechuan had caught another cold.

Before he could voice his concern, Kong Ling spoke up. "The stove burns too hot in this room. I'll wheel Yuanzhuo to the door for some air."

Yao Wenyu arranged his cloak and agreed, “Yes, I’ll have to trouble Mister Chengfeng.”

The two of them hustled Zhou Gui outside. After waiting under the eaves for less than the time it took an incense stick to burn, they saw Xiao Chiye step out. The group bowed. “Er-ye.”

Xiao Chiye’s chin was slightly flushed from being knocked against. Seeing that Chen Yang and the rest had arrived, he returned their greeting. “I was worn out from the journey these past few days and kept you gentlemen from your official business. You have my sincere apologies.”

“Er-ye, you’ve been working day and night on the battlegrounds,” Kong Ling said. “Naturally you should rest.”

They bowed once more to Xiao Chiye, who sped away with his own men to the side hall without further ado.

Zhou Gui shivered under the eaves. He swept a glance at his companions and asked in bafflement, “Shall we go in?”

Yao Wenyu sighed softly, but he couldn’t hold back a smile as he gestured toward the hanging screen. “Let’s go. You first, Your Excellency.”

While the leaders of Cizhou debated through the night, Fanzhou had already received the declaration of war.

This was far from the first time King Yi had received such a denunciation from Cizhou, but their mutual sniping last year had come to naught—Shen Zechuan had shown no intention of mobilizing troops to fight him. He took the proclamation this time for a similarly empty threat and thought nothing of it.

Fanzhou’s government had expanded anew. King Yi had gathered all the gold, silver, and other treasures he’d plundered from Fanzhou and Dengzhou into a heap and called it the state treasury. He claimed to be saving these valuables to purchase grain and farmland in the spring, but in reality, he had appropriated them for himself in order to fund his lavish lifestyle.

The number of common folks from the two prefectures who had either starved or frozen to death in the heavy snow this year was incalculable. Just a few days ago, several more houses had collapsed and sent even more people to their graves. King Yi turned a deaf ear to the reports from his subordinates and continued to indulge in debauchery.

Many who had stood by King Yi’s side during his initial revolt had been slaughtered in the subsequent fight for arable land, and the majority who remained were bandits from the southern prefectures. When King Yi had crowned himself, he had promised the scholars of both prefectures that he would bring about great change and restore the livelihoods of the people. But as soon as he settled himself atop his self-proclaimed throne, he took up his blade and cut down any scholars who remonstrated with him.

Many commoners of the two prefectures, finding themselves even worse off than before, attempted to flee through the snowstorm. Those captured were executed on the spot by soldiers under King Yi’s command. Any unlucky enough to be dragged back alive were branded with a mark on their chest and thrown into Fanzhou’s prison as prey for King Yi’s winter hunts.

It was well after midnight. The potbellied King Yi reclined on satin cushions, drinking himself drunk to the music of reed pipes. He lifted his golden cup high. “Fill it up!”

Two scantily clad women on either side of him stepped forward to pour his wine. Leaning back on his elbows, King Yi muttered, “Keep pouring! Keep pouring!”

The ruby-red wine spilled over the rim of the cup and trickled down the woman’s white-jade arm, wetting the collar that gaped around her bosom. She snuggled into King Yi’s embrace as he roared with laughter. He had long lost any sense of propriety. He reached a hand into her bodice, fondling her in front of everyone.

Cuiqing sat to the left of King Yi. A fresh-faced young man with dashing good looks knelt before her, holding her long-stemmed pipe. She took a drag, her eyes darting down below the youth’s waist. “I escaped Dunzhou by the skin of my teeth. How will Your Highness reward me? I think this one will do just fine. With some proper coaching from me, he’ll be incredible.”

This young man was handsome, with an unpowdered face, broad shoulders, and a trim waist. He raised his head to glance at her, the expression in his eyes sultry and frank. A tingle coursed through Cuiqing’s body, and her heart itched.

King Yi, large as he was, gestured for the woman serving him to help him turn his head. He looked down at the young man and sneered. “You certainly have a good eye. Do you know who this is?”

Cuiqing lifted a foot and set it on the man’s chest, feeling solid muscle beneath her sole. “I’ve never seen his like. Sweet thing, would you like to come home with me?”

King Yi laughed boisterously, then dropped his voice to a malicious hiss. “His surname is Huo—Huo Lingyun, the eldest lawful son of Huo Qing.

Know him? He was the commander of the Dengzhou Garrison Troops before the dogs got him. I was trying to take over Dengzhou, and Huo Qing preferred to die rather than yield. He killed my younger brother in that battle. After I captured him, I had him tortured for seven days and nights before dumping him in the hunting grounds so the mastiffs could tear him to pieces!”

Cuiqing uttered a surprised “Oh my” and moved in to scrutinize Huo Lingyun’s handsome face. With a cackle, she said, “Then Your Majesty is truly magnanimous to have kept him by your side and raised him into such a pretty thing.”

“I initially wanted to kill him,” King Yi said contemptuously. “He looks like a gentleman, but he’s as timid as a mouse. When he saw his old man eaten by dogs, he threw himself down to hug my thighs and begged me to spare his life. To save himself, he was willing to submit to me like an animal, so I kept him as a dog by my side.”

Cuiqing ran her hands over Huo Lingyun’s chest, and Huo Lingyun responded with an ingratiating smile. She gave him a tender push and said, “Good puppy, show Mama how obedient you are.”

King Yi tossed his golden cup aside. “There’s nothing he won’t do, and he holds up pretty well. I gave him to Chief Fang to play with for seven or eight days, and he was still alive when he returned.”

Cuiqing’s expression frosted over. “That Fang the Tenth is still so despicable in his old age!” she snapped. “He can hardly control his bowels these days, yet he’d vie with me over a man! Look at me, darling. I’m much nicer looking than that old geezer. It must have been hard on you serving a wrinkled old macaque like him.”

Huo Lingyun’s chest heaved. His clothes hung loosely off him, secured only around his waist. He was all docile obedience as Cuiqing pressed in. The interior of the hall was a wanton scene, made more obscene by the reedy moan Cuiqing let slip as Huo Lingyun returned her fondling. She fell back onto the cushion and motioned for him to continue.

King Yi, having already overindulged in carnal pleasures, applied himself to his wine. He loved wine as he did his life, and he drank himself bloated amid his bawdy court. As he rested upon the tender, fragrant bodies of the women around him, who dutifully massaged his shoulders and kneaded his legs, his snores rumbled like thunder.

The snow outside fell for half the night. By the time the sky began to pale with dawn, King Yi and his guests were sleeping like the dead.

Arms spread across his silk cushions, King Yi exhaled stale breath that reeked of wine. Nearby, Huo Lingyun wiped dried sweat off his body. He looked at King Yi, only a short distance away, then, moving soundlessly amid the deafening snores, stepped over the others to squat down beside his head.

King Yi didn’t like his guards too close when he was making merry. He feared death, so the guards with their blades were ordered to stand outside the doors. Huo Lingyun had served as a plaything under King Yi’s command for half a year, suffering unimaginable humiliation, all for an opportunity like this.

He looked at King Yi as if he was the dogs that had torn his father apart.

Three soft knocks sounded on the door.

Huo Lingyun knew then that they’d succeeded. But he didn’t stand.

Instead, he patted King Yi's cheek and picked up a cushion.

King Yi's snores stuttered as he stirred in his sleep. His splayed hand knocked aside the empty golden cup. It clattered noisily to the floor, and he finally opened his eyes. On seeing Huo Lingyun, he broke out in a cold sweat. "Away with you—"

Huo Lingyun burst into action. He ruthlessly planted the cushion over King Yi's face. King Yi struggled violently, the flailing of his thick limbs startling some of the others in the hall awake. Huo Lingyun trapped all that pasty, rippling flesh under the cushion; King Yi gasped for breath that would not come.

Cuiqing woke groggily, looking around without comprehension.

Huffing for breath, the terrified King Yi's muffled shouts came through the cushion, "Men, men! Save me—!"

Huo Lingyun began to laugh. He released his grip on the struggling King Yi, abandoning his attempt to smother him. King Yi scrambled out from under Huo Lingyun's hands and promptly sank into the pillows around him, unable to move under his own weight. He shouted himself hoarse. "Men! Come quick!"

Huo Lingyun felt for an object hidden in the folds of material around his waist and stalked after King Yi.

Naked, King Yi writhed on the ground like a maggot, shouting for his guards. Gradually he realized: Such silence meant the guards at the door were already dead. He heaved his heavy body forward, weeping in terror, and prostrated himself at Huo Lingyun's feet. "Ling—Lingyun!" He pulled over the first woman he could reach and shoved her toward Huo Lingyun. "Let me

live, and I'll give you Fanzhou. Every—everything I have is yours! You can have the title of King Yi too!"

Chest heaving, Huo Lingyun yanked King Yi up by the hair. King Yi was still reeling from this sudden reversal. Before he had fallen asleep, everyone in Fanzhou was still at his command. He kicked his legs and squealed like a stuck pig.

It finally struck Cuiqing what was happening. She fumbled desperately for her clothing as Huo Lingyun dragged King Yi closer to her, frantically shaking her head. "It has nothing to do with me! Nothing to do w—"

A thunderous blast exploded in her ears, leaving them ringing. Her eyes were wide as she froze in place, stupefied and voiceless, her face splattered with red and white gore.

The area between Huo Lingyun's thumb and index finger burned from the recoil of the bronze musket. The sensation thrilled him. King Yi's head looked like a watermelon trampled to a pulp.

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A deathly silence descended over the hall, broken a moment later by Cuiqing's sharp scream. She scrambled forward on all fours like a madwoman; then, clutching her clothes, she ran barefoot across the hall and lunged at the doors. But when the doors swung open, Cuiqing scrabbled backward and fell, her eyes trained on the doorway crammed with rifles.

"You abducted women for him." Huo Lingyun stood in the shadows, scraping splattered bits of King Yi's head off his cheek and tasting them before spitting them back out. He stared at Cuiqing, his voice frigid. "You reared those mastiffs for him."

Cuiqing shook her head, covering her body as she crawled across the floor. She heard the sound of barking and saw the teeth of those very mastiffs as they tried to squeeze through the legs of the men at the door.

Huo Lingyun stepped on King Yi's corpse and ran his gaze over the guests in the hall as though sizing up meat on the chopping block. "All of you ought to get a taste of what they can do."

Cuiqing's eyes bulged. She tried to push to her feet to run, but she'd gone weak in the knees. She watched helplessly as the dogs broke free of their chains and pounced, her own screams echoing in her ears.

Amid the cacophony of the mastiffs feeding, Huo Lingyun draped his wide-sleeved robe over his shoulders. He picked up the declaration of war King Yi had flung away and crushed it in his hand.

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Chapter 196:
Old Man

AFTER BREAKFAST the next day, Xiao Chiye donned his heavy armor to head to the Beiyuan Training Grounds. Shen Zechuan had slept little the last few days and only gotten decent rest the night before. Standing under the eaves to see Xiao Chiye off, he still seemed languid.

The snow had stopped overnight, and the sun shone so brightly the courtyard glistened. Settling Meng on one arm, Xiao Chiye turned back to find Shen Zechuan lingering sleepily at the doorway with an unhappy expression.

"When will you be back?"

As Xiao Chiye unfastened the chain on Meng's leg, Meng promptly made to pounce on Shen Zechuan. Xiao Chiye held the gyrfalcon down and answered, "As soon as I can. Send someone to get me if anything comes up." The bright wash of sunlight made Shen Zechuan seem to glimmer. Stepping out of the light, he squinted his expressive eyes and said plaintively, "A-Ye…"

Xiao Chiye lunged toward this troublemaker, startling Shen Zechuan. Taking advantage of his height, Xiao Chiye set an arm against the door frame and scooped Shen Zechuan closer with one hand when he tried to step back. The hanging curtain caught in his collar, but Xiao Chiye didn't bother moving it out of the way.

Shen Zechuan was soundly punished with a kiss.

Chen Yang, busy mulling over the escort tasks they'd need to arrange after their return to Border Camp, paid no mind to the movement on the other end of the courtyard. Gu Jin saw the curtain swaying but no trace of either man. He stripped off his gloves and said slowly, "The governor and Master…"

Unable to find the right words, Gu Jin looked pointedly at Chen Yang.

Chen Yang knew Gu Jin had been stunned that Shen Zechuan had held the discussions in his rooms last night, so he closed the book and looked toward the door. After watching for a moment, he said, "Master has been hard at work on the battlefield ever since our late prince passed. He may seem fine now, but I fear his heart is like the wound on his back—still healing. It's a good thing for them to be close."

After that fateful night, many had wanted to protect and coddle Xiao Chiye. They'd avoided talking about that snowy night as much as possible and watched Xiao Chiye cautiously, as if he had lost his strength and was now as fragile as a vase. Yet Shen Zechuan was just the opposite. He said not a single word of consolation, but the expression in his eyes spoke volumes about how he depended on him, as if only Xiao Chiye could keep the weather from being cold and the medicine from being bitter. What Shen Zechuan implied with such extreme reliance was that Xiao Chiye was strong.

Xiao Chiye didn't need to be treated like porcelain. He was iron. He was steel. He was Shen Zechuan's Hongyan Mountains.

And that was exactly how Xiao Chiye responded.

Shen Zechuan had instructed Fei Sheng to summon Gao Zhongxiong before the meeting began. When Shen Zechuan arrived, he found him waiting

outside Zhou Gui's study. He immediately dispensed with the formalities. "I've arranged for a tailor to take your measurements. You'll have winter clothes delivered to your residence in a few days. It's been cold recently. Do you have enough charcoal for the stove at home?"

Gao Zhongxiong had formerly been an adviser to Han Jin, who had pursued the Imperial Army out of Qudu. When he first came to Cizhou, he knew Shen Zechuan wouldn't trust him, which was why he had taken such an ill-advised step as bribing the yamen runner for a lowly position. It was only because Yao Wenyu had recommended him so highly that he had gotten the job in the yamen after all. But Shen Zechuan rarely spoke to him directly; standing before him now, Gao Zhongxiong was somewhat unnerved.

Whenever Gao Zhongxiong was nervous, sweat poured off him, and he couldn't help stuttering—an unfortunate side effect of the ridicule he'd suffered in Dancheng. He wiped the sweat on his brow, his chin tucked so low it was about to jab into his chest as he muttered, "Yes, Your Lordship. Um, Your L-Lordship…"

The advisors had all taken their places inside, and Kong Ling stood under the eaves waiting for Shen Zechuan to enter. Gao Zhongxiong knew he was a clumsy conversationalist and so grew even more anxious, sweating as he tried to finish his sentence.

Shen Zechuan recalled how bold and spirited Gao Zhongxiong had been just a year ago as he knelt in the pouring rain to denounce the eunuch faction. He listened earnestly, then replied, "You're not married at present, but if the monthly salary from the yamen is insufficient to support you, just let my men know."

Gao Zhongxiong had assumed Shen Zechuan detested him, and that it was only for Yao Wenyu's sake that Shen Zechuan didn't voice it. He hadn't expected him to be so amicable. For a moment, his emotions got the better of him, and his voice hitched. "It's all thanks to the grace and k-kindness of the governor that I have a job in the yamen in the first place. The salary is issued on time every month. How c-can I ask for more?"

Shen Zechuan added, even more gently, "You are a man of letters in my employ; you mustn't keep belittling yourself like this."

A multitude of emotions swelled in Gao Zhongxiong's heart as he wiped his tears. He was genuinely touched that Shen Zechuan was even willing to use him, much less show him this level of respect. As the saying went, a gentleman would die for the one who truly understood and appreciated him. He was wholeheartedly willing to follow Shen Zechuan. Before he could voice any more words of gratitude, Shen Zechuan raised a hand to stop him. He gestured for Gao Zhongxiong to keep up as they entered the study.

Cizhou had initially intended to borrow a general from the Libei Armored Cavalry to lead their attack on Fanzhou. But seeing as King Yi was already the subject of intense public resentment and Fanzhou was essentially a husk, Shen Zechuan changed his plans. Rather than rely on Libei, he appointed the commander of the Cizhou Garrison Troops, Yin Chang, to lead the charge.

Yin Chang had been a high-ranking officer in the Cizhou Garrison prior to the fall of Zhongbo. After the garrison's former commander perished

in battle, Zhou Gui had promoted him into his current post. And until Shen Zechuan came to Cizhou, Yin Chang was the commander of a one-man army.

This full-bearded man was about the same age as Ji Gang, an avid drinker and a very reluctant bather. He was notably unkempt. He could be considered kindred spirits with Qiao Tianya in a way, and in fact, before Qiao Tianya quit drinking, the two of them often drank together.

Upon hearing of the appointment, Kong Ling said hesitantly, “Yin Chang is advanced in age, and he hasn’t stepped onto the battlefield for several years. I’m afraid he may not be up to the task.”

Surprisingly, Zhou Gui disagreed. “A veteran general has his own advantages. If the governor is willing to assign him the command, he surely won’t let us down.”

“Along with Yin Chang,” Shen Zechuan added, surprising them yet again, “Fei Sheng will join the deployment to Fanzhou as an attendant officer.”

Yao Wenyu’s wide sleeves bulged from the cat curled on his lap. He covered her furry head with a hand. “Now that the roads are passable, Cizhou and Chazhou can supply the garrison’s provisions. The march to Fanzhou will take only a day.”

“That’s right.” Shen Zechuan set his fan on his lap and looked up at the others. “Time is of the essence. We must obtain Fanzhou and Dengzhou. Let’s fight a quick battle, gentlemen.”

A chorus of acknowledgments arose from the group, and with that, they began to discuss arrangements for filling the vacancies in Fanzhou’s and Dengzhou’s yamen as if the city was already theirs.

Yin Chang received his command soon after: He would lead Cizhou's troops, while Fei Sheng would take forty members of the Embroidered Uniform Guard and join the expedition as part of the entourage.

Fei Sheng met Yin Chang just before setting off. This commander's hair was even whiter than Ji Gang's. He was short and stocky, with a crimson drunkard's nose. Fei Sheng led Yin Chang's horse over and made his obeisance; Yin Chang, swaying slightly with inebriation, mumbled, "Rise."

Fei Sheng had taken a page out of Qiao Tianya's book and brought along some fine wine as a show of respect. The old general opened it up for a sniff and commended it in a voice so booming Fei Sheng nearly lost his grip on the reins.

Seeing that Yin Chang was about to sample the wine this very moment, Fei Sheng hurriedly moved to stop him. With an apologetic smile, he said, "Elder Yin, please hold on. This wine is strong, and it'll be hard to travel if you're drunk. Let's wait until we return in triumph, and I shall play host while we drink ourselves into oblivion!"

Yin Chang's nose twitched. While Fei Sheng was talking, he had already taken several gulps of the wine as though parched. The wine invigorated him and turned his nose even redder. He breathed out a few puffs of hot air and thumped Fei Sheng on the shoulder. Loudly, he said, "Lad, there's no need to worry. I've traversed Zhongbo for over a dozen years; I could find my way to Fanzhou with my eyes closed! The more I drink, the more sober I am—this is just a little pick-me-up for the road!"

Fei Sheng estimated Yin Chang's age. If it wasn't Fanzhou they were attacking, he would have been tempted to walk away on the spot. *Which part*

of this senile old man is ready to fight a battle?! But aloud, he said with an easy laugh, “Sure thing; I’m at your command this trip.” He led the horse over to Yin Chang and asked, “Shall I help you mount?”

Yin Chang tied the wineskin to his waist, patted it, and chuckled at Fei Sheng. “Heh heh, just you watch. I can get on myself—”

“Whoa!” Seeing Yin Chang’s foot slip from the stirrup, the sharp-eyed Fei Sheng deftly supported the old man. “Steady there, sir!”

Now that Yin Chang’s considerable weight was on him, Fei Sheng realized this old man boasted a pair of thick, sturdy legs. He helped Yin Chang onto his horse. The old man was quite the character. Who knew, maybe he was truly capable. But not long after, Yin Chang nodded off on his horse, and numerous times he nearly slid right out of the saddle. It was only thanks to Fei Sheng assigning a man to keep an eye on him that Yin Chang didn’t tumble off.

Cizhou wasn’t far from Fanzhou: only a two-day journey. Yet Fei Sheng had his heart in his throat the entire way, fearing the commanding general would fall to his death before they even crossed the border. Despite his worries, the journey was uneventful, and they arrived at their destination without mishap. After pitching camp, Fei Sheng waited for Yin Chang to discuss plans for the siege, but the old man went right into his tent and lay down to sleep. In no time, his snores reverberated through the camp like claps of thunder, and no amount of noise could stir him.

Fei Sheng stood outside the tent and looked around. The Cizhou Garrison was full of new recruits; Yin Chang hadn’t even arranged for a night patrol squad, and as such, the men were running to and fro like fools without a scrap of military dignity.

How the hell were they going to fight this?

Fei Sheng was sorely tempted to write a letter to Shen Zechuan right then and there. The Embroidered Uniform Guard had no choice but to step in and conduct the night patrol themselves. Fei Sheng guarded the camp until daybreak. His eyes were bloodshot as he watched Yin Chang step out of his tent with a new spring in his step.

He forced a smile from his stiff, frozen face. “Elder Yin, seems you slept well, huh?” Fei Sheng rubbed his numb hands together and flexed his toes in his boots. “So, when should we lay siege to the city?”

Yin Chang sat down and poured himself more wine from the wineskin, although he only drank two small cups today. “No rush. No rush.”

But the command Fei Sheng had received was to fight a quick battle. “There’s been no wind or snow for several days. If we miss the good weather, the battle will be much harder to fight.”

Yin Chang sipped his wine and glanced in Fanzhou’s direction. His beard shook as he smacked his lips. “Whatcha in such a rush for? I don’t think it’s time yet.”

The old man’s afraid, Fei Sheng thought. The Embroidered Uniform Guard had no record of Yin Chang. When Fei Sheng had been gathering intelligence, he’d personally flipped through Cizhou’s archives: Yin Chang had no meritorious achievements prior to the fall of Zhongbo. The reason he was promoted to commander was simply because every other general in Cizhou was dead. That, and his good fortune in meeting a nice fellow like Zhou Gui who promoted him on the basis of his seniority.

Yin Chang hadn’t made himself known as a leader even after his promotion to commander. He was drinking when Zhou Gui and Kong Ling

reclaimed the wilderness for farmland, and he was still drinking when the bandits of Mount Luo, led by Lei Jingzhe, harassed Cizhou time and again. Even after the re-establishment of the Cizhou Garrison Troops, he'd seemed more ornamental than functional: He had played no role in their organization or training.

Shen Zechuan's reasons for deploying Yin Chang now were twofold. For one, Cizhou had no other generals. But Fanzhou was also an easy target. The Cizhou Garrison Troops needed a chance to stand on their own two feet, and this was a good opportunity. The commanding general didn't need to be a genius; all he needed to do was go with the flow and capture Fanzhou at the right moment. That would suffice.

While Fei Sheng mulled this over, Yin Chang sat down opposite him, kicked off his boots, and scratched his feet. Fei Sheng wanted to talk about the battle but was too overwhelmed by the stench of the old man's feet to say a word. He jumped up and cupped his fists in salute to Yin Chang before running off for some fresh air.

Yin Chang wiggled his toes and picked the crevices clean. He had gone without a bath for almost two months now, and even he could no longer stand his own stink as he held his foot and muttered to himself.

Shen Zechuan had left Haerigu and his Scorpions at the Beiyuan Training Grounds. Their presence there was not appreciated by the Cizhou Garrison, who regularly subjected them to a variety of verbal attacks. Only the mediation of the Embroidered Uniform Guard had kept the two groups from coming to blows thus far.

Despite the cold, Haerigu had stripped to the waist to bathe at the well. As he trudged back carrying his wooden tub, he saw the gates of the camp wide open.

A column of dark heavy armor swept in, horses stomping through the thin veil of snow and sending mud splattering over Haerigu as they passed. He cursed under his breath and swiped at his face, only to see that the horse in the lead had turned back toward him.

Haerigu recognized Snowcrest. He raised the tub in his hand and called politely, “Hello, Er-ye.”

Xiao Chiye was so heavily armored not even his eyes were visible. On horseback, his strapping stature made him an even more imposing figure. Snowcrest closed in on Haerigu, forcing him to crane his head back to look up at its rider.

“The governor wants to keep me around.” Haerigu was still wearing his cloth shoes, the backs crushed under his heels. He scanned the Libei Armored Cavalry, who were eyeing him menacingly, and looked at Xiao Chiye again. “I think he’s right.”

“I brought the horses.” Xiao Chiye’s voice was low and deep. “Bring your men to the training grounds.”

Haerigu knew what Xiao Chiye wanted to see. Over the past few days, he’d been training here with the Libei Armored Cavalry. He set down the wooden tub and pulled his shoes on properly. “I’ll bring along my iron hammers. You can test out our new military formations.”

Snowcrest snorted hot puffs of air. The heavily armored steed inched closer again, forcing Haerigu to edge back.

“New formations?” Xiao Chiye asked.

Haerigu took a step back and explained himself. “I learned them from an old man.” He raised a finger to his face. “An old man with a red nose.”

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Chapter 197:
(Un)expected

FEI SHENG COULDN'T for the life of him figure out what Yin Chang was up to. The Cizhou Garrison Troops had been in Fanzhou for two days, yet they'd done nothing during this interval. The few times Yin Chang left his tent had been to take aimless strolls after his meals. Fei Sheng was burning with anxiety, but he was only here to observe; he was no military inspector.

Several times, Fei Sheng almost wrote to Shen Zechuan—but what if Yin Chang turned out to be capable? If the garrison troops returned in triumph after all, he would be the rat who tattled behind the hero's back. Whatever reasonable justifications he'd had for complaining would've gone out the window.

On this day, Fei Sheng had lain down to rest around dawn. He slept until nightfall, when he was shaken awake by his subordinate.

"Bad news," the guard reported. "The old crook is gone!"

Fei Sheng lurched up and grabbed his boots. As he hopped and stomped into them, he asked in disbelief, "Gone? He ran?"

Lifting the tent flap, he stepped out to see that though the entire campground was still illuminated, only a thousand or so garrison troops were left. His heart pounded in his chest. *It's over*. If they lost Fanzhou, his bright future was as good as gone. But a second later he thought, *That can't be right!*

No matter how he looked at it, they couldn't lose a battle with Fanzhou. All they had to do was take the city, and they would be rewarded.

This campaign would cement Yin Chang's position as garrison commander; there was no reason for him to flee. Besides, half of Zhongbo was under Shen Zechuan's control. Even if Yin Chang deserted, he had nowhere to go—not unless he threw in his lot with King Yi.

Fei Sheng looked up in the direction of Fanzhou's city wall. "That old fart better not turn traitor right before the battle."

A whistle sounded. The Embroidered Uniform Guard on night patrol rode into camp, reporting before they even dismounted: "There are troops on the move three li to the southeast!"

Fei Sheng strode toward them. "The garrison troops or those Fanzhou bastards?"

"They're heading this way." The Embroidered Uniform Guard hung his riding crop on his pommel and set a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Likely a night attack."

Fei Sheng's heart sank. From Qudu to Zhongbo, he had never once served as a general; he had no experience leading troops into battle. He turned to survey the campground. "So the commander fled. What about the second in command—the platoon commander? Get him out here!"

The Embroidered Uniform Guard behind him answered, "He's gone too!"

Fei Sheng was regretting everything now. Had he known Yin Chang was so unreliable, he would have dragged Gu Jin along—by force if he had too. At the very least, Gu Jin could have stood in for their missing commander. He forced himself to calm and asked his subordinate, "How many are left from the garrison troops?"

“A thousand.” The guard clarified, “Exactly one thousand. The old man left us a nice round number.”

“Well, I thank his entire family for that!” Fei Sheng ground out.

What else could he do? Fei Sheng braced himself; he would have to step up, however reluctantly. He shouted for the soldiers to extinguish the torches and prepare to evacuate. If nothing else, they couldn’t remain in the camp as live targets for the enemy. They would have more options if they could get out onto the snowy fields. But they had only put out half the fires when Fei Sheng caught the sound of the enemies’ footfalls on the wind.

“Abandon the camp.” Fei Sheng knew from the sound alone that they were outnumbered. “Retreat!”

The remaining soldiers tightened their belts and dragged their blades along behind the Embroidered Uniform Guard. They ran with all their might, making for a sorry sight as they tossed armor and weapons aside to lighten the load as they fled. Fei Sheng was mounted, but he didn’t dare leave these thousand men behind and escape to Cizhou with only the Embroidered Uniform Guard. He could imagine Shen Zechuan’s wrath on learning he had lost all the soldiers before the battle had even begun.

Fei Sheng had run only a few li when he heard the sounds of soldiers up ahead, moving to surround them under cover of darkness. The troops from Cizhou had been camped here several days, giving Fanzhou plenty of time to get a clear grasp of their routes. They had sent soldiers to both the front and rear of the camp in preparation for rounding up their would-be attackers in one fell swoop.

Fei Sheng was cornered; he could neither advance nor retreat. This was completely different from the battle he’d fought on the tower in Dunzhou;

now, he was exposed in the wilderness with nothing to provide cover. Perhaps his thousand soldiers might ward off a small ambush, but they were much too weak to resist an onslaught from a force several times their size.

The Fanzhou soldiers closed in around them. These men were an even more motley crew than the Cizhou Garrison Troops; they had no armor, and all of them carried different weapons. As the circle of Cizhou soldiers contracted, the Fanzhou soldiers swarmed toward them like a colony of ants. The soldiers from the garrison troops were pressed right up against Fei Sheng's horse. Wave after wave of enemy troops advanced from all directions, crowding the garrison troops until they were packed shoulder to shoulder with no room to maneuver.

Their only slim chance of survival was to fight.

Fei Sheng sucked in a sharp breath. He hesitated for merely a fraction of a second before slashing his blade across his horse's throat. Hand covered in hot blood, he raised his saber and shouted, "We are all trapped beasts here. Fight like your lives depend on it. If we can't break out of this encirclement, this ground is our tomb!"

The soldiers were terrified. When they'd seen Fei Sheng on his horse, they'd worried he would flee on his own, which had demoralized them further. All they wanted to do was kneel and beg the enemy for mercy. Fei Sheng's demonstration of solidarity instantly boosted their morale. He knew well the importance of taking the lead in battle—even before he'd finished speaking, he was charging toward the enemy with his sword drawn, leading the men northwest in a desperate bid to break through the encirclement.

A bellow suddenly echoed from the southeast, and a column of soldiers crashed into the ranks of the Fanzhou troops like a sharp blade through the

gut, tearing their formation apart with terrible speed. Blood sprayed in all directions. In no time, eight ranks of troops had sliced their way in.

Freshly drunk, Yin Chang's face was so flushed it was impossible to tell if it was from the alcohol or the cold. He snorted as he leapt joyfully down from his horse. Spotting Fei Sheng over the heads of hundreds of men, he called in a booming voice, "Oh, you're still alive!"

Blade stuck in an enemy soldier, Fei Sheng kicked the man in the chest and condensed all his feelings into a single word: "Fuck!"

Yin Chang had used him as bait!

A total of eight thousand men from the Cizhou Garrison Troops had been mobilized for this mission; originally, there should have been no need for such a strategy to take down Fanzhou. But as soon as they'd crossed into enemy territory, Yin Chang had sensed something amiss. He had long heard King Yi didn't permit the commoners of Fanzhou to flee to other prefectures and had installed roadblocks all along the borders to stop them. Yet Cizhou's troops hadn't encountered any obstructions when they crossed into the prefecture; in fact, they hadn't come across a single Fanzhou soldier at all.

King Yi had received the declaration of war. If he intended to surrender, he should have opened the gates to welcome them. But not only did he ignore the declaration, he'd recalled the troops at the border. He was clearly concentrating his forces in preparation for a fight with the Cizhou Garrison Troops.

Yin Chang guessed that to improve their odds, Fanzhou would transfer soldiers from Dengzhou; they would only dare meet Cizhou head-on when they had the numbers to crush their attackers. The old man was a crafty sort. Knowing he hadn't brought enough men to face the full numbers of two

prefectures, he left Fei Sheng as bait for the Fanzhou soldiers. He waited for the enemy to gather en masse, then used a dagger formation to launch a surprise attack from behind, breaking their formation before cutting them down one by one.

As Fei Sheng wiped his blade clean, he saw those dagger squads—first to engage in the battle—cutting through the enemy forces like hot knives through tofu, fracturing Fanzhou's ranks and making it impossible for them to form up again.

The blades of Yin Chang's squads faced outward on all sides; it was a battle formation clearly drawn from the techniques Lu Guangbai used to fight the Biansha Horsemen. The narrow columns, however, were Yin Chang's own innovation, turning Lu Guangbai's square-shaped war chariot into a long, slender dagger.

These dagger squads were ruthless and swift. The moment they pierced the enemy formation, they tore it apart from within. The Fanzhou soldiers, unarmored as they were, had no time to cover their asses. In the blink of an eye, they were chopped into mincemeat.

This old man is really something!

Fei Sheng's confidence soared. Victory was within their grasp. But before he could open his mouth to shout, Yin Chang's leg swept out and knocked him off his feet. The old general might have been advanced in age, but his martial arts were the real deal—those powerful legs sent Fei Sheng tumbling to the ground. A blade sliced through the air where his head had been with a soft whistle of steel.

The Fanzhou soldiers were now beating a hasty retreat. Waving his blade, Yin Chang chased after them and hollered, "Where are you running off

to, you bastards!”

Fanzhou had gathered all its troops for this offensive; their attackers tonight represented the enemy’s entire main force. If Cizhou could defeat them now, King Yi would lose any hope of resistance. The morale of the Fanzhou troops was already crushed, while the spirits of the Cizhou Garrison Troops were at an all-time high. This was the moment to clinch a decisive win. Yin Chang would never let the fleeing soldiers return to the city.

Fei Sheng climbed to his feet and raced after Yin Chang. But who could have guessed the old man had such amazing footwork? He was astonishingly fast as he crashed through the night. Fei Sheng could barely keep up. They pursued the enemy for a few li before Fei Sheng realized where they were heading. He was about to call out to Yin Chang when he heard the thunder of hooves.

“Reinforcements!” Fei Sheng pumped his legs so fast they nearly cramped as he tried to catch Yin Chang and drag him back to safety. “Elder Yin, Fanzhou has reinforcements!”

Fei Sheng was like Gu Jin—he had an unusually keen sense of sight and hearing. He had been given few opportunities to march with an army and therefore didn’t have Gu Jin’s ability to identify the composition of troops by sound alone. Even so, he could tell the sound of these horses’ hooves was heavier than normal; they couldn’t be ordinary cavalry.

The night was starless. Snowdrifts stretched across the wild horizon. Flurries skittered along the mounds, whispering in the wind and banking at the feet of the Cizhou Garrison Troops. Yin Chang was as stubborn as a bull. His ruddy nose, deadened by one too many cups of wine, failed to catch the

scent in the air even when directly downwind—but upon charging to the fore, he caught sight of the small troop of cavalry in the distance.

Fine snow whipped into Fei Sheng's face. As the flakes melted against his skin, he caught the smell of gunpowder. All his hair stood on end. He skidded to a halt and threw out an arm, shouting a warning to the Embroidered Uniform Guard behind him. "Muskets—!"

The word was hardly out of his mouth when sparks burst from the darkness, descending upon them like a meteor shower. Fei Sheng sprang into the air like a tiger and threw himself at Yin Chang's back, sending the old man tumbling into the snow. A resounding *bang* slammed through his skull like a club to the head, so explosive his ears were ringing.

They'd miscalculated!

Fei Sheng's back, shredded by shrapnel, burned with searing pain. He propped himself up with one arm and shook his head hard to clear it. He couldn't even hear his own voice, but he shouted down at Yin Chang, pinned to the ground beneath him: "Those things only work at close range! Retreat, *now*!"

He'd seen brass muskets in the armory of the Eight Great Battalions back in Qudu. They were a weapon delegated solely to the Chunquan Battalion of the Eight Great Battalions. Their use was strictly regulated by the imperial court, and the schematic for their construction safekept by the Ministry of War itself. Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan had both had their eyes on the muskets at some point, but neither had managed to get their hands on the designs.

No wonder this cavalry had stood unmoving until now—they were loading their firearms. Who knew how long they'd waited in the dark,

observing the battle. They obviously weren't aiming for the Cizhou Garrison Troops as a whole, but for Yin Chang himself. As the saying went, to kill a snake, one must strike seven inches below its head. Yin Chang was the most vital point of the Cizhou garrison troops—crush him, and the battle was finished.

Yin Chang had been utterly blindsided by this development. The old man thrashed in the snow, covering his ears as he shouted in alarm, "Where the fuck did this thunder come from?!"

Fei Sheng had no time to explain to this old hick. He clambered to his feet and dragged Yin Chang away from the cavalry, stumbling through the snow. Yin Chang yanked his hand away, craning his neck for one more look. Another sharp crack rang out behind them. This time, the barrage scraped Yin Chang's buttocks, making him holler in pain.

Fei Sheng thought Yin Chang had taken a direct hit. In a moment of panic, he cried, "Don't you dare die now!"

Whatever else happened tonight, Fei Sheng had to keep this old man alive. Shen Zechuan was in dire need of generals, and Yin Chang would no doubt be of great use in the future. More importantly, if Yin Chang died here, then Fei Sheng, despite being a stranger to warfare, would return in disgrace. There was no knowing whether he could even retain his original post, much less look forward to any kind of bright future. Shen Zechuan still had Qiao Tianya; Fei Sheng was far from indispensable.

No matter what, Yin Chang could not die!

The last volley seemed to have put the fear in him; Yin Chang took to his heels, covering his head as he ran. Fei Sheng didn't need to pull him along. Within a few steps, he'd left Fei Sheng in the dust, praying as he ran,

“Strike anyone but me! This old man has never done a bad thing in his life! Strike anyone but—”

Bullshit!

Fei Sheng, following right on Yin Chang’s heels, felt his fury grow. He caught up with a sudden burst of strength and hurled some choice curses. “You devious old crook! Weren’t you the one who left me as bait?!”

Yin Chang turned his head to protest. “Deception is the art of war. Deception!”

They dashed frantically through the wilderness without daring to slow. Fortunately, the enemy seemed to have no intent to pursue them and withdrew after chasing the Cizhou Garrison Troops half a li. After running half the night and fighting with the Fanzhou troops for the other half, the Cizhou troops were utterly drained. It was bitterly cold, yet every one of them was drenched in sweat and bent double, panting like an ox.

As Fei Sheng wiped his sweat and caught his breath, realization hit him. He turned to look at the first glimmer of dawn on the horizon and spat hard on the ground. “We’ve been tricked.”

By the time the military reports made their way back to Cizhou, it was late into the night. Clad in a loose-fitting robe, Shen Zechuan read over Fei Sheng’s report in front of his advisors. The study was silent—after seeing the expression on the governor’s face, no one dared make a sound.

Everyone had expected Fanzhou to be easy pickings; no one was prepared for a tough fight. The Cizhou Garrison Troops had prepared for half a year, and Shen Zechuan had invited both the Libei Armored Cavalry and

the Imperial Army to train them. Yet their first battle had been hopelessly botched. Anyone would be infuriated.

The pin-drop silence was finally broken by a long spate of coughs from Yao Wenyu. Hand covering his mouth, he said, “Your Lordship, please be appeased for the moment. The court has always had strict prohibitions on firearms; their appearance in Fanzhou is truly unexpected. Even if King Yi is in possession of such powerful weapons, his defeat remains inevitable.”

Yu Xiaozai had only just returned from Dunzhou, and his butt had yet to warm his chair. Fearing Shen Zechuan would punish the garrison troops, he braved the solemn atmosphere to speak on their behalf. “Dontcha be gettin’ het up now, m’lord—”

Crap! He’d forgotten to switch to the standard dialect.

Yu Xiaozai slapped his knee in chagrin, and the advisors around him promptly bowed their heads even lower. But the interruption from Yu Xiaozai had cooled Shen Zechuan’s anger somewhat. He folded the letter, his expression softening slightly. Only then did the others dare to breathe.

“Yuanzhuo is right,” Kong Ling added quietly. “King Yi has firearms, but they won’t change the tide. Fanzhou is running short on grain. Even if he shuts the gates and locks himself in, there’s no way out for him.”

“But it’s rather strange,” Yao Wenyu said, lowering his hand. “If King Yi had muskets all this time, how could he have been forced into such a corner? He could have raised the money he needed to recruit new soldiers by simply selling a few to the Mount Luo bandits. Moreover, this battle doesn’t seem like King Yi’s style.”

Recalling what Yao Wenyu had said just a few days ago, Zhou Gui paled. “Could it be that King Yi has already been killed by bandits in

Fanzhou, as Yuanzhuo anticipated? This battle sounds rather odd to me too."

Zhou Gui knew Yin Chang well. His promotion of the general was not as Fei Sheng had assumed. He truly felt that Yin Chang was capable on the battlefield. If King Yi also possessed such a talented commander, then Fanzhou should have launched an attack on Cizhou months ago.

Kong Ling was also getting suspicious. "Fei Sheng said the same in his report. It indeed doesn't seem like something King Yi would do."

Silence returned to the study as everyone waited for Shen Zechuan to speak. When he raised his eyes, his gaze was frosty. "Send a message back to Yin Chang: Either the garrison troops return in triumph after seven days, or he can come serve me his own head on a platter."

Shen Zechuan had given the garrison troops ample provisions and equipped them with armor and weaponry of the highest quality. If his new force couldn't even take Fanzhou, he could forget all his grand, ambitious plans for the future.

One mountain could not be ruled by two tigers.

After this spring, Zhongbo could have only one master. It didn't matter to him who currently ruled within its walls; Shen Zechuan was dead set on taking Fanzhou.

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Chapter 198:
Yin Chang

AFTER THE BATTLE last night, Fei Sheng no longer dared underestimate Yin Chang. The power of his dagger formation had been staggering; Fei Sheng had never even heard of such a tactic. If not for the sudden appearance of the muskets, Cizhou's troops would have been on the other side of the city walls come morning.

Having been startled out of his drunken stupor by the firearms, a sober Yin Chang held his bowl in his hands and tilted his head, thinking. "What in the heck *were* those things?"

Fei Sheng was staking their victory entirely on this old man. Seeing Yin Chang's bowl empty, he hurried to fill it again with dry rations. "Muskets. Have you never heard of them before, sir?"

Yin Chang shook his head like a rattle drum. He had spent most of his life in Cizhou; the highest-ranking official he'd ever met was Zhou Gui. He couldn't even list out all the Eight Great Battalions, much less their special characteristics. He was a country bumpkin through and through, a barely literate man who had never read a single book on warfare and relied entirely on intuition to feel his way through battles.

"I sure haven't. What's a musket? It has a bang like a thunderclap." Yin Chang crushed the dry rations in his bowl. "We'll be blown to smithereens before we get anywhere near them. How on earth are we s'posed to fight against that?"

“They only work up close.” Fei Sheng scooted toward Yin Chang. Both were equally filthy, covered in blood from head to toe. Cupping his hands, Fei Sheng made a circle the size of a gun muzzle and showed it to Yin Chang. “The reason the cavalry didn’t move with the rest of the troops yesterday was because they were loading their muskets. It takes effort to get the shot to fire from this opening, and it only works at close range. They surprised us this time. Damn it, now that I think about it, it’s possible they only had a handful of muskets and fired them just to scare us.”

Yin Chang finally understood. “Oh! They’re like firecrackers!”

“You’re absolutely correct, sir! Think of them as firecrackers; they can’t hit you if you run far enough.” Fearing Yin Chang would be too cowed by the firearms to launch another attack, Fei Sheng went to great pains to explain their limitations. “Think about it. If these things were really that effective, why did the Chunquan Battalion only use them in exhibitions for the emperor? They simply don’t work that well in real battles.”

Fei Sheng wasn’t lying. Why had the Chunquan Battalion kept the muskets in reserve all this time? Precisely because they were hard to use. Loading them took time; use them in street fights, and the musketmen would still be in the midst of loading the shot when the enemies’ blades reached their throats. But use them against a more distant enemy, and the lethality of the firearms plummeted. What was more, the powerful recoil made it difficult to aim accurately.

“They even burn asses.” Yin Chang was still nursing a grudge over the shrapnel that had gotten him last night. He stared into the campfire. “Are these things expensive?”

“Terribly.” Fei Sheng soaked his own dry rations in his bowl of water and wolfed the whole thing down. “And even the Embroidered Uniform Guard doesn’t have the designs. They’re manufactured by the Ministry of Works under the strict supervision of the Ministry of War. Every batch has a limited quantity; they engrave numbers on them and everything.”

Yin Chang bared his stained, yellow teeth at Fei Sheng in a grin. “Then fuck it. I was worried those firecrackers were cheap. Fanzhou is so poor right now they can’t even make solid shits—there’s no way they’re using pricey stuff like that all the time. The short range is great news. I know better’n they do—they can’t hunker like turtles in there for their whole lives.”

Doors across the city swung free and slammed under the violent howl of the north wind. The streets of Fanzhou were strewn with corpses. King Yi’s tattered banner fluttered in the snow as beggars fought over it to keep themselves warm. The entrance to the yamen was crammed with hundreds of people, most of them weak and infirm, squeezed against each other to get out of the wind. All the young and healthy men in their families had either been abducted by bandits or hoodwinked by King Yi into joining his army. These people, so famished they were skin and bones, were all there to beg for food.

This winter wind was so bone-chilling people were dying from the cold every night.

“It’s a good thing Brother Huo wishes to open the granaries and distribute grain to the people.” Inside the yamen, Yang Qiu, one of Fanzhou’s resident bandits, slumped in an armchair with one leg propped across his knee. Grinning broadly, he said, “We’re all for it. But the Cizhou Garrison Troops are right at our city gates, and the soldiers on the front line can’t go

hungry. As long as the soldiers don’t starve, you can distribute the grain to whoever you want.”

Both sides of King Yi’s former hall were packed with people standing or sitting—all bandits from Fanzhou and Dengzhou. Yin Chang had been correct in his guess. To counter the Cizhou Garrison Troops, King Yi had brought together troops from both prefectures in hope of bargaining with Shen Zechuan when the time came. Nobody had known he’d invited a wild beast to live in his own home. In the end, Huo Lingyun had collaborated with those very same bandits to kill him.

Sitting on King Yi’s bandit throne, Huo Lingyun said, “The city has run out of food. I’m asking all of you—my brothers. Lend me some grain to feed the people.”

“Shen Zechuan’s sealed off the routes to the west, and the traveling merchants no longer dare come this way. I’ve been eating fucking stale grain since the tenth month.” Yang Qiu felt bitter just thinking about it. “Hell, I was thinking of asking *you* people for grain. Old Fang the Tenth, weren’t you working hand in glove with King Yi? You’ve been licking his balls all this time; don’t you sit here and pretend to be poor.”

This Fang the Tenth had an insatiable appetite for young men. He was so drained from his years of debauchery that his face had taken on a sallow pallor. Clenching a handful of walnuts, he sneered. “What a bunch of bull. Don’t look at me. My stores were added to the military rations long ago; I’m already feeding ingrates like you.”

“The fuck we fighting a battle for when we’ve no fucking food?” Yang Qiu spat. “Might as well run while we can.”

“Run?” Fang the Tenth snorted. “Everything to the northwest’s been choked off by Shen Zechuan. Either you go south to Tianfei Watchtower and beg Marshal Qi to let you join her army, or you ford the Chashi River and work with those Biansha Horsemen. Wasn’t Shen Zechuan planning to attack Duanzhou in the second month? I say we mess up the game for him and knock a gap out of his claim on Zhongbo. Will he still dare throw his weight around then?”

These men were all bandits. First, they’d heard Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye had killed Lei Changming in Cizhou, then they got wind that Shen Zechuan had taken down Cai Yu in Chazhou. After that, it wasn’t long before news came of Lei Jingzhe’s demise in Dunzhou. All the major bandit leaders in Zhongbo had met terrible ends at Shen Zechuan’s hands. It didn’t take brains to figure this out; even if they were thinking with their little toe, they could see Shen Zechuan would never let them off.

Yang Qiu doubted Huo Lingyun was qualified to handle this mess. He had come to fish in troubled waters, hoping to haul King Yi’s money vault away before the city walls were breached. But when he arrived, he found Fang the Tenth and the rest had the same idea. Everyone was sitting here cooking up their own schemes, each of them anxious for the others to hurry up and die.

Although Huo Lingyun was ostensibly their leader, he didn’t mind feigning weakness. Face expressionless, he said, “There’s no need to be anxious. Shen Zechuan sent an old man without any prestige or ability. Look how fast he ran last night—he’s timid. He won’t get far.”

It was true Yin Chang had no reputation to speak of, but at the same time, he had disposed of nearly half their soldiers the first time he’d appeared

on the field. Huo Lingyun himself had gone out to fight in last night's battle, but he kept what he saw to himself. All Yang Qiu and Fang the Tenth knew was that they had suffered heavy casualties.

Yang Qiu thought Huo Lingyun no more than a pretty face, without much use beyond his looks. Even so, he smiled as he said, "That's right. Brother Huo comes from a distinguished family. The hell would some backwater blusterer like Yin Chang know? I'm only worried about food, nothing else. If we keep going through provisions like this, we won't last till spring even if we do manage to beat back the Cizhou Garrison."

"So what do you have in mind?" Fang the Tenth said contemptuously. "Let's hear your brilliant ideas, good sir."

Yang Qiu rolled his eyes and looked at Huo Lingyun. "Yan Heru still has shops in Dunzhou. Let's trade in King Yi's family assets for grain. He's the type who holds no sentiment for anything but cold hard cash; he's sure to help us. As long as we can survive the winter, the throne is as good as yours. It won't be too late for us to recruit soldiers and buy horses when the snow melts."

Fang the Tenth listened to Yang Qiu paint this rosy picture and didn't say a word. Huo Lingyun was exactly the kind of young man he liked—but he had seen King Yi's mutilated corpse at the yamen, gnawed by dogs until it was unrecognizable. He couldn't help but fear he would share the same fate.

After spending six months chained to King Yi's side, Huo Lingyun knew very little of the situation outside Fanzhou. Seemingly convinced, he asked, "But with the garrison troops laying siege to the city, how are we to conduct business with Yan Heru?"

Yang Qiu had an answer to this as well. “My people are familiar with Dunzhou. Lei Jingzhe’s old subordinate, Liu’er, had eyes on the ground there—I can talk to them.” Yang Qiu had been involved with Cuiqing and tagged along with her to Dunzhou for business in the past. “If Brother Huo is willing to trust me, I’ll gladly make the trip for you.”

Fang the Tenth instantly turned hostile. “Oh, so you’ve got it all plotted out, huh?!”

Just like that, they were at each other’s throats, neither one willing to concede. King Yi’s wealth would set any of them up for life; no one was willing to share with the others. The atmosphere instantly became tense.

Unable to refute Fang the Tenth with words, Yang Qiu grew more antsy the longer he sat among them, worried Huo Lingyun would collapse under the next assault from Cizhou’s garrison troops. He steeled himself and made up his mind: He would kill them all and grab the money tonight.

On the city wall, a Fanzhou soldier was relieving himself in the corner when he heard a series of whistles from below. He fastened his pants, and—not daring to stick his head out—peered down from the gap between the merlons. A bonfire was blazing on the field outside. The Cizhou Garrison Troops had taken formation before the city walls with their shields raised yet had not sounded the war horn.

Yin Chang stood at the very front. He took a few gulps of wine and shouted, “Is King Yi home? Call him onto the wall. Let’s have a little chat!”

The memory of being practically filleted by the sharp blades of the dagger squad the night before was still vivid in the minds of Fanzhou’s

troops. The white-haired old general had come after them like a maniac. It was an encounter they wouldn't soon forget.

The platoon commander on the walls, a bandit who reported to Yang Qiu, had been specially assigned here by Huo Lingyun. He leaned over the battlement and spat at Yin Chang. "Chat my ass. You think we're idiots you can trick out of the city?"

Not to be outdone, Yin Chang cursed right back. "Fucking wimps, the lot of you! Sniveling little cowards like you aren't fit to kiss my ass! Bah, brats! You think your balls are big enough to fight battles? Get your asses down here and lick our governor's shoes!"

Yin Chang, having spent much time on the streets in his youth, spewed every obscenity that came to mind. Fortified by the wine, he could stand there and curse a blue streak for three days and nights without repeating himself once. His speech was crude to the extreme, and when he got particularly excited, he led the garrison troops to chant profanities with him. All in all, he had such a merry time it was as though New Year had come again.

The platoon commander was accustomed to throwing his weight around in Dengzhou while working under Yang Qiu. In Fanzhou, even King Yi had treated him with courtesy. He was still seething from being chased all over by Yin Chang the night before; he'd even gotten stabbed in the buttocks. He leaned over the battlement and let loose a torrent of verbal abuse.

The moment the platoon commander retorted, Yin Chang waved a hand, and the Cizhou Garrison Troops behind him hollered back a litany of curses. The platoon commander couldn't beat them in numbers, and his voice was quickly drowned out. Furious, he pounded the wall and commanded, "Arrows!"

The instant the Fanzhou troops raised their bows, the Cizhou Garrison Troops below took to their heels. They had come ready with shields, and they cursed as they fled while Fanzhou's arrows clattered down on them. Once they were out of range, they turned back around and booed the soldiers atop the city walls.

Yin Chang leapt back into arrow range and raised both hands, the signal for the Cizhou Garrison to sound the war horn at the back. The old man's ruddy face was glowing as he yelled, "These damned Fanzhou cowards—"

The Cizhou Garrison Troops called back, "—are as chicken as they come!"

Yin Chang shouted again, "And stray King Yi's—"

"—a fucking dog!" the soldiers finished.

Fanzhou's arrows could not reach them. Soldiers of all ranks leaned over the battlements, trying to get their own swears in, to little effect. Yin Chang had even composed a short ditty for the Cizhou Garrison Troops, which they howled at an earsplitting volume from where they stood.

Half of the platoon commander's body hung over the battlement as he cussed until he was red in the face. He bellowed across the night air, "Shut the fuck up, you ol' buffoon! I'll slice off all your rotten tongues!"

"Bring it on." Yin Chang seemed to be drunk as he stomped through the snow and turned in circles, clapping. "If you don't come down here like you oughter, I'll make every last one of you my daughter. Ha!" He pinched his fingers together like a mincing lady and twisted to look back at the

platoon commander on the wall, imitating him in a shrill voice, “I’ll slice off all your rotten tongues, and tear your faces off too!”

Yin Chang was advanced in years, the wrinkles on his face as layered as petals on a flower. Yet his imitation of a woman was spot on; he had that elusive feminine charm down pat as he stomped his foot and sent shards of ice skittering over the frozen ground.

The platoon commander’s face went blue, then chalky white.

Fanzhou’s troops were composed of men from all over the two prefectures; they couldn’t truly be considered fellow soldiers at all. Sworn enemies and bitter adversaries had been thrown haphazardly into a squad together, and now half of them were snickering behind the platoon commander’s back upon seeing him made a fool of.

The platoon commander had never been so humiliated. He shoved the soldier next to him aside and roared, “Prepare my horse!”

The soldier hurried after him. “But Huo—”

The platoon commander yanked the soldier up and barked, “*Fuck* him. I’m Chief Yang’s right-hand man. Huo Lingyun was still wetting his pants when I was killing the garrison troops in Dengzhou. You think he’s fit to give me orders? Hm? Bring the muskets!”

The sight of Yin Chang scampering away like a frightened rat from the muskets last night was still fresh in the platoon commander’s mind. They had lost half their men in that battle after Yin Chang had broken their formation. But tonight, the city walls of Fanzhou were right behind them; they were bursting with confidence. At worst, they could simply retreat behind the wall. What was there to be afraid of? They had horses. They could speed back to

the city wall and let loose some arrows. If Yin Chang still dared to pursue them then, he would be courting death.

Yin Chang hitched up his trousers, then reached for the hilt of his blade. He was serious now, his cloudy eyes as quiet as the expanse of the night sky as he adjusted his breathing. This was a technique he'd taught himself. As long as he steadied his breathing before a battle, he could stand firm on his feet.

There were all kinds of gifted generals in the world. Many were young, not only ambitious but dazzlingly brilliant. Yet there was another kind of general, the type who had gone their whole lives without making a name for themselves. They stood always with their backs to the sky, because their eyes were planted firmly on the small piece of land beneath their feet.

Yin Chang was old.

The instant the city gates opened, Yin Chang felt a rush of fighting spirit course through his body. It was the desire that had burned in him his whole career, until this day. What ravages of time, what old age—he was still so young. The fervor that blazed in him now allowed him to maintain the speed of his draw without the slightest stall.

Even if he was no famous general, he would win one battle!

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Chapter 199:
Triumphant Return

YANG QIU STRODE out of the yamen. As he stood under the eaves waiting for his carriage, he spotted the commoners seeking refuge from the wind. Finding them inauspicious, he spat on the ground and rubbed it out with his foot. “Are you people dead?” he snapped to the subordinates around him. “Huo Lingyun has an excuse for his ignorance—do you? These people are crawling with disease. By the time the infection spreads through the yamen, it’ll be too late for you to cry!”

The men rushed out fearfully, hurrying to drive the commoners away.

Yang Qiu boarded the carriage and closed his eyes to rest, fuming as he recalled the earlier conversation. Midway through his journey, his subordinate called through the curtain, “Chief, there’s news!”

Yang Qiu opened his eyes. “Go ahead.”

“Fang the Tenth has not returned to his residence,” the subordinate said. “He shook off his tail, then switched carriages and made a beeline for the vault!”

Yang Qiu yanked the carriage curtain aside and glared. Fearing he had already lost his opportunity to claim the vault, he ordered, “Quick, gather our men!”

In less than an hour, the subordinate was back with another report. The Cizhou Garrison Troops had attacked the city. The platoon commander had charged out with a musket, but the Embroidered Uniform Guard was waiting right under the walls. The man only made it a few lengths before they

snapped his neck clean off. This turn of events was so unexpected the city gates weren't shut in time. Fanzhou's banners atop the city wall were already burning.

Yang Qiu's face turned deathly pale at this news. He gripped the carriage door and looked toward the city walls, where fire was raging against a backdrop of indigo clouds. Half of the four thousand men Yang Qiu had brought from Dengzhou had gone to fill vacancies on the city walls. At first, in order to have a hold over Huo Lingyun, he had arranged to place the fiercest men under his command there. He hadn't expected them to be so easily killed by the garrison troops.

Yang Qiu flew into a rage. "Is the dumb bastard out of his mind?! The hell is he defending the city for? It's not even my fucking city! Take your weapons and get to the vault, now. If you come across that old Fang dog, hack him to pieces on sight! Once you've loaded up the money and treasure, get out of there!"

A flurry of footsteps echoed throughout the city as the bandits' boots trampled the icy slush. Mud spattered the legs of their pants and streaked the hems of their robes as they ran. Whistles from all directions fused into a single shrill wail. No one could tell who was who when the gangs collided in the streets, and no one stopped to ask questions as they rushed frantically to draw first blades and cut each other down. Puddles of blood cooled in the snow. The bandits, slavering over King Yi's treasure, had gone feral.

When Yang Qiu barged into the vault, he found stacks upon stacks of chests. He pried open the nearest one, which was filled to the brim with dazzling gold ingots. For a moment, the bandit was frozen in place, unable to

move an inch. Then he scooped the ingots into his arms and wept with joy. “King Yi is so fucking rich!”

Shen Zechuan’s chokehold on the northwest of Zhongbo had left Yang Qiu feeling increasingly suffocated. Now he could break out of Shen Zechuan’s control, even if he had to smash his way through with gold.

“Get these chests out of here, quick.” Yang Qiu stared fixedly at the gold in his arms. “Get them all onto the wagons!”

Yang Qiu’s wagons were parked within the vault’s courtyard, but there were too many chests, and they were all exceedingly heavy. His people had only moved half of them before the wagons were packed full. Unwilling to leave anything behind, he instructed his subordinates to go steal more wagons.

Fang the Tenth was next to arrive, shouting orders the moment he got off his carriage. Waving a handkerchief, he yelled, “Stop him! Don’t let him leave!”

The door to the vault was narrow. A great number of bandits, hoping to steal a piece of the treasure for themselves, had hidden gold in their clothes while they were inside. Yang Qiu slashed them to death when he noticed their bulging pockets. The man had lost his mind; he couldn’t tolerate anyone challenging him for the money. Just as they were moving the last chests, Fang the Tenth’s wagons entered from the back and got tangled up with Yang Qiu’s convoy, completely blocking the courtyard entrance.

Fang the Tenth leapt his way across the wagons and landed in the courtyard, waving for his men to follow. They hacked at every one of Yang Qiu’s men they could see. Yang Qiu’s subordinates were crammed between

the carts, their hands full with the heavy chests. They didn't stand a chance—one slash of the blade, and they toppled over dead.

"Sneaky son of a bitch!" Fang the Tenth cursed. "Give me back my money!"

Wiping blood off his face, Yang Qiu kicked the vault door open and charged out with blade in hand, slashing left and right. The space instantly became a site of slaughter. Blood stained every wooden chest crimson. The carts at the back jostled against one another, knocking over any chests still unsecured.

Rocks tumbled over the ground.

"Rocks?!" someone shouted. "Are these fucking rocks?!"

Yang Qiu and Fang the Tenth froze where they stood. Both turned to look at the scattered stones. Panicked, Yang Qiu abandoned the fight. He lunged at the nearest wagon and smashed a chest open, only to find that it, too, was filled with rocks. Among the dozen or so wagons, only a few chests contained gold, while the rest were packed with stones and gravel. Yang Qiu's legs went weak as chest after chest was broken open. He braced himself against the side of the wagon, his eyes so red they were about to drip blood.

Fang the Tenth frantically looked around. "We've been had!"

The wagons at the entrance of the courtyard suddenly smashed through the door. A moment later, the courtyard door banged shut. A greasy liquid poured down the insides of the walls. One bandit took a sniff, and the color promptly drained from his face. "Oil!"

“Break down the door.” Fang the Tenth squeezed between the wagons and pushed his way toward the entrance, yelling, “Quick, break it down!”

Carefully treading through the snow, Huo Lingyun edged along the top of the wall. His hands had turned blue in the freezing night. But it didn’t stop him from striking the flint.

Yang Qiu turned at the sound. “Huo Lingyun, you son of a bitch!”

Huo Lingyun was clutching a sheaf of yellowed papers—notices King Yi had posted outside the yamen. He touched that bundle of lies to the tinder. Bathed in the glow of the flames, he said, voice dripping with revulsion, “Go to hell.”

Tongues of flame licked toward the sky as the fire swept through the courtyard in a roaring wave. The dummy chests contained not only rocks but also dry, flammable grass. The flames engulfed the bandits in seconds. Yang Qiu and Fang the Tenth struggled in the blaze, rolling on the ground and cursing Huo Lingyun amid blood-curdling screams.

Huo Lingyun watched the fire hungrily. The sound of crackling flesh was exhilarating, like the pop of belated firecrackers. He roared with laughter as the stench of charred flesh rose up with the smoke, his eyes as bloodshot as his victims’.

Burn!

He would burn this scum to death.

Power and influence were a crock of shit. All he desired was for every last one of them to pay with their lives. From King Yi to Cuiqing, from Yang Qiu to Fang the Tenth. *Not a single one of them will go free!*

Unable to escape, the bandits pounded on the walls and wailed beneath the gouts of flame. The oil soaked their clothes, and the inferno tore away their hair and crisped their faces into unrecognizable char. The fire spilled out of the courtyard, leaping along the eaves of the houses until all of Fanzhou was ablaze.

"Who's setting the city on fire?" Yin Chang, dragging the platoon commander's head in one hand, jumped up and down from frustration. "The governor will have to pay for the damages if it's burnt!"

Fei Sheng wiped blood off his saber and looked up toward the firelit sky. "Internal strife, huh."

The Cizhou troops had breached the city gates, yet no one had come to aid the Fanzhou soldiers guarding the wall. Discouraged and fatigued, they couldn't even shoot their arrows straight. The moment they saw their platoon commander killed, they gave up any attempt at resistance.

Fei Sheng shook off his distraction and looked pointedly at the Embroidered Uniform Guard behind him—a signal to search the city and seize the muskets.

Yin Chang's tirade earlier had left him thirsty; he insisted on drinking a few gulps of wine now that the battle was as good as won. He scratched his cheek and held the still-warm head out to Fei Sheng as though giving him a gift. "Take him. Keep him well."

Fei Sheng darted out of the way to avoid the blood. "Why the hell are you carrying that thing around?!"

Still holding his treasure, Yin Chang said with a roguish laugh, “Hand it over to the governor when we get back. It’s evidence of our military achievement.”

A chill ran down Fei Sheng’s spine as he imagined the scene: Shen Zechuan sitting in the front hall, all in white, as this gory head was passed to him. If a drop of blood touched so much as the edge of Shen Zechuan’s folding fan, they could kiss their lives goodbye. He hurriedly took the platoon commander’s head and, while Yin Chang was busy with his drink, shoved it into the hands of a soldier with orders to bury it.

Sure enough, the Cizhou Garrison Troops returned in triumph. Zhou Gui met them outside the city gates with a welcome party. As encouragement for the new soldiers, he had cooks prepare a spread of roast meat and grilled fish to fill their stomachs after their long march. While the soldiers stopped at the gates to wait, the commanding general entered the city to see the prefectural governor.

Yin Chang hadn’t dared to take a single sip of wine today. He followed Fei Sheng into the prefect’s manor. The door to the study was wide open, and Kong Ling and the others were already standing on the steps. As soon as they entered, Kong Ling came forward to welcome them.

“Elder Yin.” Kong Ling smiled at the old general. “A warrior’s treasured blade truly never rusts. Looks like you still have it in you!”

Yin Chang knew Kong Ling well. Craning his neck toward the door, he asked quietly, “The governor is inside?”

“Waiting for you.” Kong Ling ushered them up the steps. Yin Chang always went weak at the knees when he met officials. “The governor

personally assigned you this command," Kong Ling reassured him. "There's no need for me to tell you what that means. Just answer any questions His Lordship asks. Don't worry."

Fei Sheng spoke up beside them. "I'll help Elder Yin so he doesn't trip over himself before His Lordship."

It would have been better if he hadn't mentioned the possibility. The moment he did, Yin Chang's legs turned to jelly. He placed his hands on the steps for support in a panic, then scrambled to his feet with an "Oh my," and demanded, "What's His Lordship gonna ask? What if I can't answer?"

Kong Ling turned back and was about to reply when Yin Chang's two-month-old body odor hit him full in the face. He was so dizzy he couldn't remember what he was going to say. Earlier, he had been standing upwind and didn't notice the smell. They were already standing in front of the hanging screen; it was too late to back out now.

Kong Ling threw Fei Sheng a look—*Why didn't you remind Elder Yin to take a bath?!*

Fei Sheng almost choked on all the unvoiced grievances stuffed up inside him. He wanted to respond, *What was I supposed to do if he refused?* This crafty old coot had an endless stream of excuses at his disposal. The winter was too cold, he'd said; it was more practical to be dirty since they had to march to war. The layer of grime would prevent their feet from freezing—wasn't it all hogwash?

The screen had already been lifted, so Kong Ling had no choice but to enter. Out of habit, Yin Chang lifted his foot to stride across the threshold, only to realize that this doorway had none. To accommodate Yao Wenyu's wheelchair, Shen Zechuan had long since instructed the servants to remove

the thresholds inside and outside the manor. Yin Chang gingerly set his foot down and shuffled in.

Shen Zechuan had seen Yin Chang before, but only from a distance. Back when the garrison troops had yet to be reestablished, it was the Imperial Army who had fought the bandits from Mount Luo. Later, when the garrison troops began recruitment, Shen Zechuan had been constantly away and out of the city. The two men could just barely recognize one another.

Today, Shen Zechuan was wearing a wide-sleeved robe over his regular attire as he sat in the seat of honor, the color so crisply white he seemed to radiate a pure and ethereal glow.

Kong Ling began, “Your Lordship, this is—”

Before he could finish, Yin Chang had dropped to his knees. A series of heavy thuds rang out as the old man kowtowed repeatedly toward Shen Zechuan.

The whole thing’s already gone to hell, Fei Sheng thought as he knelt to kowtow as well. He raised his head and hurried to help Yin Chang up. The advisors entering behind them had no idea what was going on. When they saw the general kneeling, they assumed the governor must be furious. They followed suit and knelt as well.

The atmosphere in the hall had taken a strange turn. Fan dangling from one hand, the allegedly furious prefectural governor swallowed his words of congratulations, his greeting cut off by their kowtows. He floundered for a moment, unsure whether to remain seated or stand up.

Yao Wenyu was quickest to react. Seated in his wheelchair, he bent over and spoke gently to Yin Chang. “Elder Yin braved a fierce battle and narrowly escaped death; it’s natural to feel overwhelmed upon seeing His

Lordship. But your triumphant return today is a joyous occasion. Let us not be so somber."

His words were wisely chosen: He indirectly praised Shen Zechuan's judicious selection of a general, inspiring such gratitude in the old man that he was moved to tears. At the same time, he also made it clear to the advisors behind him that this master and servant pair was on good terms with each other and all was well.

Shen Zechuan finally found his voice again. "The journey must have been difficult indeed. Fei Sheng, hurry and assist Elder Yin. Gentlemen, please rise and take your seats."

Fei Sheng helped Yin Chang up—but how would Yin Chang have the courage to look at Shen Zechuan? He approached him with the same caution he did the enemy troops and didn't dare even breathe too loud.

Kong Ling was torn between laughter and tears. What had initially been a relaxed and cheerful atmosphere had been destroyed by one misstep from Yin Chang. Now everyone was afraid to so much as smile.

Fortunately, Shen Zechuan was adept at controlling the atmosphere in the hall. He lowered his voice and took an unusually gentle tone as he asked Yin Chang about their food and clothing while on the move, and about the weather on their journey back. After a series of such unhurried exchanges, Yin Chang's answers flowed much more smoothly.

At this point Shen Zechuan began to question him more closely about the battle.

Fei Sheng had hoped Yin Chang's body odor would go unnoticed, but the smell was simply too strong. If the old man wanted to skip baths for two months that was his business, but on top of that, they had just returned from

the battlefield and reeked of blood, a stench amplified by the heat in the hall. Yu Xiaozai, seated next to Kong Ling, was listening politely to their conversation when he caught a whiff. Distracted, he attempted to identify the scent. It bore a strong resemblance to rancid rice mixed with unwashed feet, yet it also recalled salted fish soaking in swill. It was a smell unlike anything he had ever come across, a truly one-of-a-kind odor. What was more, this odor—sharp and intense—was a force to be reckoned with. In no time it pervaded the entire hall such that Fei Sheng, with his acute sense of smell, was close to passing out.

Shen Zechuan's expression remained unchanged throughout.

Anyone else could subtly cover their nose with their sleeve, but not Shen Zechuan. Yin Chang had conquered a city for him. If he revealed any hint of disdain here, he would surely wound the old man's feelings. Moreover, in consideration of the defeat that had come before success, the rewards accorded to Yin Chang were modest, at least on the surface. If Shen Zechuan covered his nose, it would give those beneath him free rein to belittle Yin Chang.

Unaware of the suffering he was causing, Yin Chang gesticulated wildly as he exclaimed over the firearms in Fanzhou, his excitement increasing as he rambled on.

Xiao Chiye, who had been staying at the Beiyuan Training Grounds the past few days, was late to arrive. He had ridden over specifically to meet this old man when he heard of his triumphant return. He made his way under the eaves but, so as not to interrupt, signaled the attendant not to announce his arrival.

Gu Jin was helping Xiao Chiye remove his cloak when his nose twitched, and an expression of horror came over his face.

“What’s wrong?” Xiao Chiye asked in puzzlement.

Before Gu Jin could respond, they heard a *clang* from inside the hall, followed by Yu Xiaozai’s panicked cry. “Now why in tarnation did he faint?!”

Fei Sheng, upon hearing Xiao Chiye arrive, had panicked. Xiao Chiye was sure to catch a whiff of the reek the moment he entered. The person sitting right beside Yin Chang was Shen Zechuan; Fei Sheng couldn’t afford to shoulder the responsibility should he take ill due to the stench. Yin Chang had fought a winning battle, so nobody would blame the old man. That meant that they could only settle the score with Ol’ Fei the Tenth—this was inevitable. It was just his rotten luck to be the one assigned to the campaign. Everyone in the hall was close to keeling over, and Fei Sheng was about to be wrongly prosecuted for their deaths. Thus he took one for the team: He collapsed in a heap and played dead before Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan immediately lifted his folding fan and adopted the impressive air of a commander leading a magnificent army. With perfect composure, he instructed, “Help him to the side hall and call for the physician. Elder Yin, you must be tired after your long journey. Chengfeng, send someone to prepare hot water. Once Elder Yin has properly bathed and rested, we can start the banquet.”

The moment Yin Chang heard the word *bathed*, he jumped in alarm. “Your Lordship, I don’t—”

From outside, Xiao Chiye called out, “Qiao Tianya.”

“Got it.” Qiao Tianya ducked inside and hoisted Yin Chang over his shoulder. He laughed boisterously as the old man struggled in his grip.

“Happy New Year, Elder Yin. Time to wash up!”

The gentlemen in the hall were so relieved they didn’t wait for the word from Shen Zechuan before hurrying to throw open the windows. The rush of cool air on their faces felt so refreshing everyone simultaneously sucked in a long, deep breath.

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Chapter 200:
Clandestine Affair

NO ONE HAD expected it would take nearly four hours for Yin Chang to bathe. The gentlemen in the study waited until they were famished. Yu Xiaozai's eyes drifted time and again to the snacks on the table, his stomach growling.

At last Shen Zechuan extracted himself from a discussion of Cizhou's affairs and turned to him. "Youjing. When we mobilize troops to Duanzhou in the second month, Dunzhou will serve as the supply depot. Tantai Hu is unfamiliar with the workings of the yamen there, so I'm sending you to keep an eye on things. You'll have the authority of inspection and oversight. If anything crops up, don't bother going through the relay stations—send the report directly to my desk."

In Qudu, Yu Xiaozai had been a censor in the Chief Surveillance Bureau and a student of the Left Censor-in-Chief, Cen Yu. He had spent his early years serving as a touring censor and had often been dispatched to inspect government operations in the regions outside of the capital. As such, he was more familiar than most with the ins and outs of the local yamen. Shen Zechuan was reestablishing Dunzhou's administration, and the key functionaries there were all fresh faces from Cizhou; they were not yet reliable. Yet he was not sending Yu Xiaozai to Dunzhou as a censor—instead, he was merely giving him the authority of oversight and direct report associated with this office. Although Yu Xiaozai had no official title, his position would carry considerable weight. His responsibilities were

equivalent to the old position of Zhongbo's Surveillance Commissioner, who had overseen the review of each prefecture's local administration.

Yu Xiaozai hurriedly redirected his gaze from the snacks and rose to bow to Shen Zechuan.

"Dunzhou is still unsteady on its feet," Xiao Chiye said. He had taken his seat beside Shen Zechuan. "Tantai Hu holds a military post; he's not supposed to interfere with the yamen. But we have a severe lack of manpower—we can't worry about the strict division of duties right now. Tantai Hu's a tad obtuse in this area, so he'll need you to advise him as much as you can on the larger issues."

Tantai Hu was a trusted subordinate of Xiao Chiye. Sending him to Dunzhou was essentially a demotion, but Zhongbo was severely lacking in generals; they couldn't do without him. Moreover, given his background, no one in the Dunzhou yamen would dare defy Tantai Hu. Xiao Chiye was therefore throwing his weight behind Yu Xiaozai as well. With Xiao Chiye's support and an appointment from Shen Zechuan, Yu Xiaozai would have no one to fear when he made his rounds in Dunzhou. And if he should be assigned to other prefectures in the future, his work in Dunzhou would bolster his position.

Yu Xiaozai was practically radiating glee, but it wouldn't do for him to show it. He held his joy in check and bowed again to both of them. "This humble subject will certainly do my best to honor my lords' kindness."

His answer was loud and clear—but so was the next rumble from his stomach. The resulting duet was so resounding the whole study was stunned into silence.

“The celebratory banquet for the garrison troops is tonight.” Shen Zechuan saw it was already getting dark. “I shan’t hold you gentlemen back. Let’s start the feast.”

The feast was laid in the side hall. Shen Zechuan took his place in the host’s seat, but Xiao Chiye had just returned, and Yin Chang still had yet to show himself. He sat for only a short while as a gesture of appreciation before taking his leave. Most of those present were his advisors, and they didn’t dare drink or let loose in Shen Zechuan’s presence. Once the prefectural governor retired for the night, they would be more at ease.

Qiao Tianya had carried off Yin Chang, and with no one hovering over him, Yao Wenyu was unable to turn down the warm invitations of his fellow advisors to share toast after toast. By the time Qiao Tianya returned, he was slightly tipsy, leaning back in his chair as he laughed and chatted with Kong Ling and Gao Zhongxiong.

Catching him in such a rare moment of leisure, Qiao Tianya paused outside the door. He let down the hanging screen and waited patiently under the eaves. There Fei Sheng caught sight of him; he beckoned him over and called through the fall of fine snow, “Let’s go. What are you standing here like a pole for? There’s a table set up in the duty room. We’re all waiting for you.”

Qiao Tianya didn’t move. He looked relaxed and unrestrained as he leaned against the doorpost. “Has everything been arranged for Master?”

“Of course it has.” Fei Sheng strode over and peered through the gap in the hanging screen. “These gentlemen tend to break up late; you won’t miss anything if you come back after we’re done. There are guards inside and out here. Everything will be fine.”

Qiao Tianya thought for a moment, then lifted the screen. Yao Wenyu glanced over at once, as if sensing his waiting presence outside. After a short pause, Qiao Tianya lowered it again. “I still have a few jars of fine wine in my room. Send someone to fetch them; consider it my apology to everyone for my absence.”

Fei Sheng was still for a moment. “Who cares about that old wine of yours? Come on. Master released us from duty, yet you’re still lingering here.” He had already had a few cups and was more talkative than usual. “Master assigned me to recruit new members for the Embroidered Uniform Guard a few days back. Did you hear about it?”

Qiao Tianya folded his arms over his chest and eyed Fei Sheng. “Sure.”

Fei Sheng pointed at himself, then at Qiao Tianya. Holding back a belch, he said, “I’ll be honest with you. Master has his eyes on you to lead the cavalry he wants to build in Duanzhou since you’re pretty good at fighting and all. What are you doing with yourself? You follow Yao Wenyu around as though you’ve forgotten your roots. If you go on like this, you’ll sabotage your own future.”

Snow had gathered on the hilt of Qiao Tianya’s saber. He looked out into the courtyard and said absently, “This is where my future lies. You worry too much.”

“The grand mentor himself gave you to our master,” Fei Sheng reminded him in hushed tones, frustrated at Qiao Tianya’s lack of concern for his own career. “The day Master took you in was the day he received Avalanche.”

Qiao Tianya had once sworn to be Shen Zechuan's blade. Courage, insight, temperament, physical prowess—he had them all. Had he been willing, he could have become for Shen Zechuan in Zhongbo the same kind of right-hand man as Zhao Hui and Chen Yang in Libei. His future would be bright, his prospects boundless, and restoring his clan to its former glory would become more than just a dream. But ever since Shen Zechuan had assigned him to Yao Wenyu's side, he had lost his desire for such a future. The tasks Shen Zechuan had handed to Fei Sheng—recruiting new soldiers, accompanying Yin Chang's troops to Fanzhou—were all assignments Qiao Tianya no longer cared for.

Qiao Tianya blew on the snowflakes drifting toward him and watched the wind instantly sweep them away to disappear into the pitch-black night. He left the snow on his blade untouched, and Fei Sheng unanswered.

Xiao Chiye had removed his armor. He sat reading Fei Sheng's report on the details of the Fanzhou campaign wearing only an inner robe. "To think even King Yi could get his hands on muskets somehow. Was he more capable than we thought?"

"One hundred and thirty-five of them," Shen Zechuan said as he removed his wide-sleeved robe. "All of them from the Chunquan Battalion. The serial numbers from the Ministry of War are still engraved on them."

"He was merely a mountain bandit without a proper army." Xiao Chiye set his elbows on the armrests and watched Shen Zechuan undress. "Who gave him such expensive trinkets?"

Shen Zechuan's outer robe slid over the skin of his wrists and pooled on the woolen rug. His day robe was fastened with pearl clasps, which made

subtle popping sounds as he flicked them open to reveal his smooth, fair neck. He laid a hand over his nape, lost in thought. So unguarded was he in this moment, it was as if he wouldn't put up the slightest resistance even if he were pinned down to the rug and ravished.

"There's no benefit for Qudu in letting those firearms slip from their grasp. They must have been stolen." Shen Zechuan's throat bobbed slightly when he spoke. Xiao Chiye gazed at it without so much as a flicker of expression; he was exceedingly familiar with this sight. When he pressed himself against Shen Zechuan until they dripped with perspiration, Shen Zechuan had a habit of tilting his head back and exposing that tender throat. Xiao Chiye was simply too tall. Even when Shen Zechuan was lying down, he had to crane his neck to meet Xiao Chiye's kisses.

Xiao Chiye conjured up a dozen such scenes in his mind, but his placid expression betrayed nothing of what he was thinking. He unconsciously caressed his thumb ring, rotating it on his finger. "I heard Yin Chang brought back a captive?"

"King Yi's lover—a man surnamed Huo. Chengfeng said he's the son of Huo Qing, the former commander of Dengzhou's garrison." Shen Zechuan glanced over at Xiao Chiye. "We can meet him tomorrow morning."

"This man used muskets to scare Yin Chang into retreating," Xiao Chiye noted. "He knows a thing or two, then."

"Someone must have taught him." Shen Zechuan released the last pearl clasp, and his day robe slid to the ground.

The beauty, finally comfortable, kicked off his wooden clogs as he walked. His slender waist, no longer hidden by fabric, was silhouetted in the dim light. He was a priceless jade made flesh. Xiao Chiye felt a rush of

secretive pleasure. This sort of foreplay between them was something no others were privy to. The desire to occupy Lanzhou gradually swelled in his chest, filling it to the brim.

“Send a few muskets to Libei tomorrow morning. The military craftsmen can take them apart to determine the design. Haerigu learned Yin Chang’s formation just from watching back at the Beiyuan Training Grounds. He used it in our drills and gave me no chance to fight back. When we march on Duanzhou, I want Yin Chang to come along.” Xiao Chiye tossed Fei Sheng’s report onto the desk.

Shen Zechuan picked up a cup of tea to take a sip, then turned his gaze on Xiao Chiye again and asked pointedly, “Will you not take me along?”

“Sure I will,” Xiao Chiye said flippantly. “I’ve a tigress of a wife back home who keeps a tight leash on me. I can only steal a few moments of pleasure with you when we’re on the move with the troops.”

Wickedness twinkled at the upswept corners of Shen Zechuan’s eyes. “You have such a fierce wife. It scares me.”

Xiao Chiye matched Shen Zechuan’s tone. “Come now. I’m fierce too.”

Shen Zechuan held up the folding fan between their lips, playing the vixen. “I’m not afraid of you being fierce.” Coyly, he said, “But you only come over once in a blue moon.”

Xiao Chiye tilted his head slightly. “What can I do? I’m but a henpecked husband.”

“If it were me…” Shen Zechuan lowered the fan. He leaned close to Xiao Chiye’s lips and murmured, “I would stay home all day longing for you,

making love to you, stirring up a storm under the sheets…”

Xiao Chiye kissed him, muffling those shameless words as he pulled him onto the bed. He felt his way down Shen Zechuan’s back but found no foxtail. At this hour, the lamps had dimmed. The drapes around the bed had long since been let down. There was no one to interrupt them, yet their urgency was such that it really was as if they were having a clandestine affair. They moved desperately against each other, biting back ragged moans.

“But I want both of you,” Xiao Chiye whispered.

Shen Zechuan had already been bitten to the point of tears, his cheek chafing against the sheets. Under Xiao Chiye’s heated gaze, he strained to look up with wet, shimmering eyes and panted in a fit of pique, “You… greedy…cur!”

Xiao Chiye had spent nearly two months on the battlefield, and he’d been at the Beiyuan Training Grounds ever since he returned to Cizhou. Now, as he took hold of Shen Zechuan’s chin to stare into his eyes, he chuckled lowly. “You’re absolutely right.”

Shen Zechuan was taken ruthlessly by Xiao Chiye.

After so long, their coupling felt completely different. The change in Xiao Chiye was evident in every movement. This time, there was no tenderness in his treatment of Shen Zechuan. Being so hungrily invaded, possessed from head to toe, made Shen Zechuan feel as if he’d surrendered completely, a captive to the conquering Xiao Chiye.

His heartbeats. His voice. His breath. Xiao Chiye wanted all of Shen Zechuan; even as he dominated him, he wanted more.

Sweat and tears mingled on Shen Zechuan's face. He couldn't take any more—he could barely catch his breath. Yet Xiao Chiye wanted even the tears he had yet to shed.

Xiao Chiye had once desired the sky and the grasslands. He desired the Hongyan Mountains. He had tamed falcons and horses, flying across the vast lands of his dreams. But he didn't want any of that anymore. He wanted Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan began to cry in earnest. He raised his head, his expressive eyes glistening, awash in emotion. As he tipped over the edge into euphoria, he murmured, "A-Ye…"

Xiao Chiye thought he was afraid. But Shen Zechuan lifted his chin slightly, his face flushed, and licked his lips. His eyes were seductive and just as wild as the time he'd leapt into Xiao Chiye's embrace from Fuxian Peak. "Oh, how I love you."

Those words spurred Xiao Chiye faster, and he kissed Shen Zechuan fiercely, gripping Shen Zechuan so tight he couldn't escape by even an inch, or break free of his hold long enough to breathe. Every thrust drove deeper; Shen Zechuan's body was wracked with fine shivers.

They abandoned themselves to pleasure in the dim lamplight, the sheets growing damp with their sweat, until there was nothing left but each other.

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Chapter 201:
Passions

SHEN ZECHUAN couldn't get up.

The insides of his thighs were covered with bite marks, and Xiao Chiye had fallen asleep on top of him, pinning him down. Shen Zechuan had still been asleep when Fei Sheng came to call him late in the morning.

He couldn't even lift his face. Xiao Chiye leaned down and kissed him where he had turned his head to sleep, the kisses so intense Shen Zechuan could scarcely breathe.

"Spare me, please…" Shen Zechuan strained to rise, then collapsed back onto the bedding, eyes half closed, and rasped, "I… Mind's in a whirl… Can't think…"

Xiao Chiye's chest pressed against him, a furnace that had him sweating. Red bloomed everywhere across Shen Zechuan's skin. There were the bite marks, and then there were the pinch marks. The back of his neck was the worst off, having borne the brunt of Xiao Chiye's assault.

At the most intense point last night, Shen Zechuan had found himself caught in Xiao Chiye's lap with his legs hooked over Xiao Chiye's arms, unable to move except to lean back against Xiao Chiye's sturdy chest. Amid such overwhelming pleasure, Shen Zechuan forgot all about playacting their clandestine affair as he cried out "A-Ye" and "Ce'an" until he came. After that, Xiao Chiye had pinned him down and continued until Shen Zechuan came again, face pressed to the pillow. He couldn't remember how many rounds they had gone, only that, eventually, his tears had run dry. Toward the

end he was dizzy, but Xiao Chiye still wasn't satisfied; he thrust into Shen Zechuan until his soft moans became pleas for mercy. His voice, thinned to nothing by his cries, inflamed Xiao Chiye; it made his heart itch so madly that the only way he could find relief was to bite Shen Zechuan again.

"Poor thing." Xiao Chiye pulled him into his arms and whispered, "I'll hold you up."

Yin Chang had risen early today and come to wait outside on the veranda to seek an audience with the prefectural governor. Fei Sheng saw the old man glancing around, looking uncomfortable in his own skin, and struck up a conversation. "Sir, you met with him yesterday. Why are you still nervous?"

Yin Chang tugged at his sleeves. "I feel all wrong. They rubbed me so hard with those bars of soap yesterday—my skin was all wrinkly!"

Fei Sheng stifled a laugh. Seven or eight young male servants had been sent to attend Yin Chang yesterday. Together, they'd scrubbed him for a full four hours, going through several big tubs of hot water. It wasn't until the middle of the night, after the banquet had ended, that the old man made his escape, holding up the legs of his pants as he scuttled away from the servants.

"Bathing is good for you," Fei Sheng said. "You look well—more energized. You could pass for my brother today."

"Don't you fucking lie to me," Yin Chang mumbled. He hadn't had a good night's sleep. "You've got a silver tongue, that's for sure." He looked around furtively again. "Is Er-ye inside too?"

"Uh-huh. He rushed back just to meet you."

“Then can I go to Libei?” Yin Chang blurted. “I’d like to meet General Lu.”

Fei Sheng was stumped—he didn’t know how to reply. Yin Chang’s desire to meet Lu Guangbai was no surprise; that deadly formation of his was obviously adapted from the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops. But Libei was fighting a war right now, and the area along the Chashi River was unstable. Yin Chang couldn’t run around as he pleased.

He was still thinking when he heard movement on the other side of the door. “Let’s see His Lordship first,” Fei Sheng suggested. “See what he says.”

A window had been cracked to let in some fresh air. It wasn’t especially chilly today, but Shen Zechuan was sensitive to cold and wore a coat even indoors. During the journey back, Fei Sheng had taken a look into Huo Lingyun’s background. He’d written a report on his findings in their entirety for Shen Zechuan, leaving out no detail. Shen Zechuan hadn’t gotten anywhere close to reading it before bed last night and was looking through it carefully now.

“The muskets Fei Sheng seized were handed over by Huo Lingyun himself.” Shen Zechuan turned the folding fan between his fingers before setting it down. “This man is interesting; I’ll have to meet him.”

He and Xiao Chiye were both seated on the settee. All that separated them was a low table. Sitting with an elbow propped on its surface, Xiao Chiye looked playful, but the expression in his eyes was wicked. Every glance over was an invasion. His eyes swept between the words *male lover*, *bitten to death*, and *arson*. “He’s tough,” he commented.

If Huo Lingyun hadn’t thrown a wrench into their plans with the muskets, Yin Chang would have taken Fanzhou during his first assay. Shen Zechuan would never have been forced to give Yin Chang the ultimatum to win or return with his own head on a platter. Yin Chang later successfully provoked the enemy out of the city, stepping onto the battlefield openly this time. But the fire Huo Lingyun had set in Fanzhou had diminished the impact of the battle. Failures and achievements had offset each other, and Yin Chang’s reward was once again reduced by half.

It was possible Huo Lingyun genuinely wanted to throw in his lot with Shen Zechuan but had not employed the optimal strategy. He’d fought a battle with firearms to show Shen Zechuan he was useful—more useful than the generals Cizhou currently had.

They were still reviewing the report when Yao Wenyu entered with Kong Ling pushing his wheelchair. Following them was Yu Xiaozai. The gentlemen bowed to Shen Zechuan, who gestured for them to take their seats.

“It’s so cold,” Shen Zechuan said to Yao Wenyu. “You should have asked Qiao Tianya to come drop me a note, and I would have moved the meeting to your courtyard so you didn’t have to make the trip.”

Yao Wenyu hadn’t slept well the night before, and his eyes were slightly bloodshot. He had brought his cat along today, and the animal was curled up in his lap. “It’s just a stone’s throw away; there’s no need for Your Lordship to put everyone to such trouble. I saw Elder Yin and Fei Sheng waiting outside. Will you see them now?”

“Yes,” Shen Zechuan said. “Elder Yin has been waiting for almost an hour.”

Fei Sheng led Yin Chang in, kneeling to both Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye looked at Yin Chang. “Did Elder Yin sleep well last night?”

This was the first time Yin Chang was formally meeting Xiao Chiye. He hadn’t gotten a good look yesterday, but now that he was within spitting distance… *Holy smokes*, he thought. *This Er-ye is much too tall!* Xiao Chiye’s legs as he sat on the settee were almost as long as two Yin Changs!

Yin Chang grew nervous all over again. Wringing the hem of his robe, he mumbled, “Not—not too bad.”

“Elder Yin, please take a seat.” Shen Zechuan knew Xiao Chiye was an imposing presence, neither approachable nor agreeable; thus, he softened his own tone. “We’ll be discussing some military affairs with the gentlemen today. The troops will soon be deployed to Duanzhou, but Fanzhou cannot be left unattended.”

Kong Ling was familiar with Dengzhou, so he was the first to speak. “Based on Fei Sheng’s report, Huo Lingyun is inextricably tied to everything that happened in Fanzhou. He comes from a family of generals. His father was Huo Qing, the commander of the Dengzhou Garrison who repelled the bandits in that prefecture in the sixth year of Xiande. Huo Lingyun’s feud with Yang Qiu and the rest of Dengzhou’s bandits probably begins there.”

“I remember Huo Qing.” Yu Xiaozai settled in his seat and continued, “He submitted a memorial to the Ministry of War that year—essentially a report of victory. However, within the next few years, the prefect of Dengzhou, Peng Fangmiao, impeached him for being headstrong and conceited. He accused him of resorting to arms without due consideration and

thus provoking the bandits in the prefecture to seek revenge on the commoners, which devastated much of Dengzhou. The Ministry of War deliberated quite a while before deciding not to promote him."

Shen Zechuan motioned for Fei Sheng to stand, then addressed the gentlemen. "The local governments are a mixed bag," Shen Zechuan explained. "From the time the Pan and Hua factions took control of the court, the impeachments that came from the lower levels were a mess. The majority of them arose from personal grudges. Very few of the cases handled during the reign of Xiande were valid."

He was right. Setting aside his own reasons for disliking the Xiande Emperor, the factions during his reign were as irreconcilable as fire and ice. Everyone in Qudu distinguished between enemy and ally based on what faction they supported, and the division within the regional governments was even worse. The legitimacy of Huo Qing's impeachment could not be determined based on a few memorials from that time.

"Whoever Huo Qing was then has little bearing on Huo Lingyun now." Xiao Chiye drew a clear distinction between father and son these days. "You escorted him back. What did you think of him during the journey?"

Yin Chang was an honest man with a one-track mind; Fei Sheng didn't let him speak. He could tell from Xiao Chiye's tone that the second master did not like Huo Lingyun, and neither did he.

Fei Sheng served Shen Zechuan. He would have plenty of opportunities to distinguish himself on the field once they established the light cavalry—but Yin Chang might not get another chance. The old man's hair and beard were white. After all these years, he'd finally been granted this one battle. And now, some male consort had appeared out of nowhere and

snatched most of the old man's credit out from under him with a few flashy tricks.

Though his expression remained neutral, Fei Sheng was displeased. "For the sake of revenge, this young man endured great hardships; he did whatever it took to achieve his goal. He's impressive, I'll give him that. But when I arrived at Fanzhou's yamen, I noticed the coats of King Yi's mastiffs were full and glossy. When I asked around, I learned Huo Lingyun fed King Yi and Cuiqing to the dogs. If he had a grievance against King Yi, why didn't he reach out to us earlier so we could work together?"

Rather than agree with Fei Sheng, Shen Zechuan paused for a moment in thought. "Since everyone is here now, go ahead and summon him."

Huo Lingyun had spent the last two days in a cell. The wardens who delivered his meals never spoke to him. Fei Sheng had taken special care to give him heavier shackles than usual, but it seemed he did nothing but sit there.

The moment Huo Lingyun stepped into the courtyard, Gu Jin could hear something amiss. Flanked by Ding Tao and Li Xiong, he watched from the veranda as Huo Lingyun trudged past.

"They're heavy." Li Xiong pointed at Huo Lingyun's feet and said to Ding Tao, "That's the set of chains I wore!"

"But he seems to be moving freely." Ding Tao tattled to Gu Jin, "Jin-ge, he's trained in martial arts!"

He was far from merely *trained*.

Gu Jin lifted a finger, motioning for the guards hidden around the courtyard to be on alert. He patted Ding Tao and Li Xiong's backs to shoo the

two young ones aside, then approached the half-lowered hanging screen and caught the eye of Qiao Tianya on the other side.

Qiao Tianya looked appraisingly at Huo Lingyun's back. "He's rather formidable," he murmured.

Shen Zechuan didn't size Huo Lingyun up immediately, but Huo Lingyun didn't shy away at all from sizing up Shen Zechuan.

The prefectural governor was twenty-two this year. He was undoubtedly beautiful, the corners of his eyes tapering up at the perfect angle; any higher, and they would give him a seductive, come-hither look. As they were, they were expressive, as if they should be swimming with emotion. Yet he seemed extraordinarily cool and detached. His gaze, when he looked over at last, was chilling. He was unfathomable, an abyssal pit that appeared more dangerous the longer one looked at him. Whether it was because Shen Zechuan had been in a position of leadership for a long time Huo Lingyun didn't know, but he found that Shen Zechuan had an overpowering air when he did not speak. It wasn't the kind of imposing aura that rushed at him head-on, but a bone-chilling frost that crept along his limbs and froze his heart.

So this was Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye nudged his thumb ring. His posture remained unchanged, but the weight of his presence fell upon Huo Lingyun like a kick to the face. Narrowing his eyes, he looked down at Huo Lingyun, his regard so oppressive the young man could barely hold his head up.

Shen Zechuan was the precious jade pearl Xiao Chiye held between his fangs. Those with prying eyes were asking for death before they ever got within striking distance of Shen Zechuan. Just a look was an affront to Xiao Chiye, even if Huo Lingyun was only looking out of curiosity.

Although the gentlemen advisors in the room hadn't grasped why, they could sense the second master was displeased. The atmosphere grew heavy, pressing down on their chests until it became difficult to breathe.

"Your confession statement doesn't tell the whole story." Only now did Shen Zechuan glance at Huo Lingyun. "You turned over the firearms, but you didn't explain where they came from. It's vexing when someone only gives half an answer."

Huo Lingyun had experience with both men and women, and he thought he understood the look in Xiao Chiye's eyes. He flicked his gaze away from Shen Zechuan and shifted; the shackles around his wrists clanged. "Naturally, there are some things I can only discuss in front of the prefectural governor," he answered calmly.

"If what you say displeases me," Shen Zechuan said, his tone cool, "then whether you're in front of me or not, it's all the same."

"When Cizhou advances on Duanzhou in the second month, you will be met with Scorpions in addition to the Biansha Horsemen." Huo Lingyun looked up at Xiao Chiye without a trace of fear. "Xiao Fangxu is dead. Does the Libei Armored Cavalry still have what it takes?"

The pad of Xiao Chiye's finger froze on the notch in the thumb ring. He finally moved. Deliberately, he leaned forward, his aura enveloping Huo Lingyun; across the ground crept the shadow of a wolf with one eye.

Fei Sheng, who had been standing off to the side, swiftly dropped to one knee and lowered his head. Beside him, Yin Chang felt a prickle of fear run down his back. Heart thumping, the old man almost slid all the way to the ground as he knelt after Fei Sheng.

A deafening silence descended, within and without the room.

Xiao Chiye was angry.

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Chapter 202:
Connecting the Dots

HUO LINGYUN had seen wolves before. In the wilderness of Dengzhou, wolves that were all skin and bones slunk through King Yi's hunting grounds with their tails between their legs, eyes green with insatiable hunger. But this wolf hailed from Libei. Not only did he possess a powerful physique, he exuded an aura so intimidating Huo Lingyun gripped his chains tight, the muscles on his back tensing as he braced himself. He couldn't even gasp for air—he felt certain that, as soon as he opened his mouth, Xiao Chiye would snap his neck. Xiao Chiye had taken complete command of the atmosphere around him. Though he made no move to touch Huo Lingyun, his presence pressed Huo Lingyun into the ground.

Xiao Chiye wanted Huo Lingyun on his knees, with his head down.

In that silence that stretched without end, Huo Lingyun broke into a cold sweat. He'd meant to resist—but by the time he returned to his senses, he had already averted his gaze and bowed his head.

Since that heavy snowstorm, the Libei Armored Cavalry had had a tough time on the battlefield; they hadn't won a single battle. Gone were the days when the armored cavalry reigned in the north. Huo Lingyun had thought to stomp on Xiao Chiye's spirit, hoping to level the playing field during negotiations between them. Yet instead he had slammed his foot into an iron plate and been pinned to the ground.

Xiao Chiye's shadow did not recede. His lowered gaze came to a stop on the back of Huo Lingyun's head as he echoed with cold detachment,

“Does it still have what it takes?”

Deflated, Huo Lingyun clenched his jaw and swallowed his indignation. To think this man had made him afraid.

Unlike Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye didn’t feign civility; his style was to dominate and dictate. He held down the heads of those who provoked him and offered them only one way out—his way. The Imperial Army had, in its earlier days, learned this from experience.

Shen Zechuan replaced the lid on his teacup and tapped his fingers against it, slowly and without rhythm. He knew how to thaw the atmosphere after a cold spell; this subtle action curiously unraveled the tension in the hall, allowing Fei Sheng, still kneeling, to resume breathing.

Outside the door, Gu Jin, too, exhaled lightly and loosened his grip on the hilt of his blade.

Only after Huo Lingyun’s entire back was drenched in sweat did the shadow enveloping him pull back. Xiao Chiye’s eyes remained fixed on him; he merely leaned back in his chair, as though he’d lost interest in the cowed Huo Lingyun.

Shen Zechuan lifted the lid of his cup and took a sip of tea. “You’re well-acquainted with the situation in Duanzhou.”

These two passed the interrogation seamlessly between them, yet both exuded a dangerous aura. Huo Lingyun’s palms were clammy; he re-evaluated his contempt, certain now that he had been right to come.

“The Scorpions came to King Yi.” Huo Lingyun had decided to show his hand. “During the twelfth month last year, one of them tried to convince

King Yi to ambush Chazhou and cut off your access to Qidong. To that end, he gifted King Yi a shipment of firearms."

In a flash, both Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye thought of the White Scorpions. These Biansha spies concealed themselves deep in the heart of the Zhou empire, collaborating with Amur from within.

The twelfth month of last year had been a turning point: It was then that the Libei Armored Cavalry had gone completely on the defense. Had King Yi been gutsy enough to launch a surprise attack on Chazhou as the Scorpions wished, Shen Zechuan's attention would undoubtedly have been diverted, and his aid to Libei reduced. What was more, if King Yi had truly cut off Qidong's route north through Chazhou, Qi Zhuyin would have had to take a detour around the eastern side of Tianfei Watchtower and pass through King Yi's territories. If the Scorpions had set an ambush en route, the grand marshal's life would have been in danger.

"They're keeping a close eye on Marshal Qi." Shen Zechuan looked at Xiao Chiye, his eyes conveying the words he left unspoken. Hassen's ambush of Xiao Fangxu had been intended not only to deal a blow to Libei, but also to lure out Qi Zhuyin. As expected, Amur knew the Zhou empire like the back of his hand.

"But King Yi didn't agree." Xiao Chiye's words were scathing: "He was more than willing to huddle in Fanzhou like a sniveling coward—until you came along and blew his head off with a gun. So then, did the Scorpions come looking for you?"

Huo Lingyun stared at his knees. "No."

"You're lying." Shen Zechuan skimmed the foam from his tea and raised his eyes. Across that ribbon of steam, he pronounced with certainty,

“You’ve been in contact with the Scorpions.”

During his time in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, Shen Zechuan had successively served as the southern and northern judge, and spent a good deal of time in the Imperial Prison. He had his own way of interrogating people, a skill he had put to use first with Ji Lei, then with Xi Hongxuan. He was adept at using his environment to manipulate the atmosphere of a conversation.

Sometimes, the most effective strategy was to say as little as possible and let the listener’s imagination run wild.

Huo Lingyun knew he had to remain clear-headed. One more wrong answer and the blade would be at his neck. He braced himself and exhaled deeply, as if forcing himself to remain calm. He was already at a dead end—the worst that could happen was happening now. When he lifted his head once again, he had regained some of his composure.

“That’s right,” he said. “I was in contact with the Scorpions long before I met King Yi. In the sixth year of Xiande, my father fought a triumphant battle. *He* sent his men to persuade my father to give up Fanzhou with the promise of a noble title. But my father turned him down.”

Shen Zechuan inclined his head slightly. The lingering redness at the corners of his eyes melted into the shadows behind him. “You said *he*.”

Not *they*.

Huo Lingyun recalled that night several years ago, when the carriage from Qudu brought a letter of incredible significance. Huo Qing had read it by candlelight, running his fingers over the promise within.

If the Bianjun Commandery was the most wretched post in Qidong, then Dengzhou was the most dismal prefecture of Zhongbo. These two

locales were similarly destitute; Dengzhou's one and only advantage was that it didn't face regular attacks from the Biansha Horsemen as the Bianjun Commandery did. After the fall of Zhongbo, the rampant bandits had put Huo Qing in a terrible fix. He'd been stranded in this small corner of the land, unable to get any assistance from the imperial court.

That letter had been Huo Qing's last chance to escape his predicament. Yet he hadn't taken it, and had ended up as dinner in the dogs' bellies.

"Yes, *he*." Huo Lingyun bit out the word. "This man is hiding right in Qudu—and he's no ordinary person if he can make such a promise. After my father refused the bribe, he was impeached by that Peng bastard. The Ministry of War refused to promote him. They believed the lies and cut funding to the Dengzhou Garrison. The bandits resurfaced immediately. Yang Qiu went to Fanzhou and joined hands with Cuiqing, and the two rebuilt the brothels, trafficking people from all over. At the same time, he made overtures to Lei Changming on Mount Luo."

The dots were all connecting now.

Shen Zechuan had been puzzled when he looked into the Yan Clan's accounts in Dunzhou. How had Biansha not left any traces when they stole those weapons and equipment from the garrison armories? Now it was clear: The supplies hadn't traveled through Dunzhou, Mount Luo, and Duanzhou at all. From the very beginning, Lei Changming and Lei Jingzhe had merely been a smokescreen Amur set up in the northeast of Zhongbo.

No wonder Yan Heru had been so sure of himself—he had indeed never touched any supplies meant for Amur. At the same time, he must have been in the know. The merchants under him all had dealings with Cuiqing. When he added this to what Yu Xiaozai had mentioned regarding Peng

Fangmiao's impeachment of Huo Qing during the sixth year of Xiande, Shen Zechuan was even more certain of his theory.

"Amur's supply lines went through Fanzhou." Shen Zechuan cradled the teacup in his hands. "They delivered the goods directly to the banks of the Chashi River without passing through Dunzhou."

This *he* had dangled a noble title before Huo Qing, hoping to bribe him into becoming a White Scorpion. If their commander turned traitor, the Dengzhou Garrison Troops would become escorts for the Scorpions' deliveries. After Huo Qing refused, this instigator instead sought out the prefect of Dengzhou, Peng Fangmiao, who accepted the bribe and impeached Huo Qing in the harshest terms.

"Youjing." Shen Zechuan turned to Yu Xiaozai. "When was Peng Fangmiao transferred to Dengzhou—what year? Before that, who was his teacher?"

Yu Xiaozai wracked his brain. "I can't remember. Zhongbo has been neglected in its administration since the fourth year of Xiande, and the prefects of Duanzhou, Dunzhou, Fanzhou, and Dengzhou changed frequently. All I remember is the impeachment memorial."

Great Zhou's officialdom was as vast as the sea. There were innumerable positions of varying importance in Qudu alone; the more trivial posts in the regional governments were even more complex. Yu Xiaozai couldn't possibly remember all the various magistrates and vice magistrates within the thirteen cities of Juexi, let alone the sprawling territory of Zhongbo. Such minute details as the year one particular official was transferred or the teacher who had recommended them were lost to time.

It had to be known that in Qudu, when someone sent a visitation card and called on a prestigious house, all it took was for the head of the clan to be willing to see them and exchange a few words, and the visitor could proclaim themselves the host's "pupil" the moment they stepped out of the door. They would be sure to address their host as "teacher" at every meeting thereafter. On top of that, the Hua and Pan factions had upended all the rules of the court in the years of Xiande, resulting in countless lackeys operating under their names.

After a moment of silence, Xiao Chiye called, "Ding Tao, get in here."

Ding Tao stuck his head in. Alarmed by Xiao Chiye's expression, he walked in stiffly, legs and arms moving in tandem. Everyone in the hall paused to look at him. He opened his eyes wide; he wanted to glance at Shen Zechuan, but he didn't quite dare to.

Xiao Chiye was in no hurry. He shifted in his seat, then asked Ding Tao, "Do you remember the name 'Peng Fangmiao'?"

Ding Tao shook his head blankly.

Outside, Qiao Tianya suddenly had a thought. He piped up. "Tao-zi, we're looking for someone involved in creating the Ministry of Personnel's shortlist of officials to be sent out to the provinces after the fourth year of Xiande, someone who could have recommended this man. Think again. It could be Hua Siqian, Wei Huaigu, or even Pan Rugui."

During the fourth year of Xiande, when the Biansha Horsemen slaughtered the city, the only remnants of the Dengzhou Garrison had been Tantai Hu and his compatriots, all of whom were absorbed into Xiao Chiye's Imperial Army. The prefect of Dengzhou had died in the massacre as well, so this Peng Fangmiao must have been assigned after the fourth year of Xiande.

Ding Tao's penchant for notetaking was well known, but his memory was also astounding. His family's notebooks were modeled after the record-taking practices of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, and Ding Tao had learned the method during the years he tagged along with his father. Back in Qudu, Qiao Tianya had once snuck into the Prince of Libei's manor at night and been stopped by Ding Tao and Gu Jin. With just one glance, Ding Tao had guessed the origin of his steel needles—a feat Qiao Tianya still remembered to this day.

Ding Tao fished out his little notebook. For a moment, all was silent save for the rustling of pages. Watching him, Yu Xiaozai also began to remember. He blurted, "The Chief Surveillance Bureau—"

Ding Tao's eyes lit up. He jabbed at a page with his finger. "Chief Surveillance Bureau! That's right, the Chief Surveillance Bureau! Gongzi," Ding Tao said, looking expectantly at Shen Zechuan, "the assassination attempt at the banquet! When the Embroidered Uniform Guard and Chief Surveillance Bureau were investigating Master, there was someone with the surname Fu. That's him!"

Fu Linye.

Of course Shen Zechuan remembered. It was during that case he had first noticed something amiss with the Quancheng silk. The man who had shirked his own responsibility and pushed the search of the Prince of Libei's residence onto Shen Zechuan was none other than the Right Censor-in-Chief, Fu Linye.

Yu Xiaozai slapped his thigh and stood up. He was so annoyed with himself he had to laugh at the ludicrousness of it. Chortling with Ding Tao, he said, "I remember now too. Your Lordship, before that assassination case,

everyone thought ol’ Fu Linye was just an official of humble origins! That’s right—Fu Linye was the one who put Er-ye through all that suffering back then. That dog-bellied son of a bitch! He’s slicker’n a slop jar, sneakin’ around with Wei Huaigu an’ them!”

The rivalry between the noble clans and those of humble origins had come to a head after the fourth year of Xiande. Back then, Hua Siqian had ruled the Grand Secretariat, with the empress dowager and Pan Rugui assisting him. Hai Liangyi had relied solely on the Chief Surveillance Bureau’s reviews to keep the minions of the Hua and Pan clans from running amok in the regional governments. Fu Linye, who’d worn an honorable mask back then, had wielded considerable influence with Hai Liangyi and the other officials of humble origins when they were considering the Ministry of Personnel’s potential appointees.

“If Fu Linye was the one who assigned Peng Fangmiao to Dengzhou…” Shen Zechuan paused. “…then the man who offered the bribe to Huo Qing could be Wei Huaigu or even Xi Hongxuan.”

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Chapter 203:
Songyu

HUO LINGYUN obviously didn't know who this instigator was, or he would've given the man's name the moment he opened his mouth. But whether it was Wei Huaigu or Xi Hongxuan, both were already dead.

Yao Wenyu stroked the back of the cat's neck with two fingers. "In the sixth year of Xiande, no one but the Hua and Pan factions could have made the promise of a noble title to Huo Qing. At that time, Xi Hongxuan had yet to join the imperial court, and Wei Huaigu didn't have that kind of power. Why does Your Lordship suspect these two?"

"Noble. Title." Xiao Chiye stressed the two words. "Trace this promise up the chain, and you'll end up with the names Pan or Hua. Making an offer like that would be as good as proclaiming their guilt."

"If we look at the trajectory of Peng Fangmiao's career after that," explained Kong Ling, "the promise of a noble title was likely a ruse. What they actually bribed him with was something else." He broke out in a cold sweat at the thought of the Scorpions. "Although Qian Jin was the Minister of Revenue up until the eighth year of Xiande in name, Wei Huaigu was the one really in control of the treasury since the first year of Xiande."

The former Minister of Revenue, Qian Jin, had been dismissed from office along with Hua Siqian after the attempted coup at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. Yet the keys to the empire's vaults had not fallen into Hai Liangyi's hands—Wei Huaigu had stepped forward and immediately taken over as the Minister of Revenue, where he continued to lead Hai Liangyi around in

circles. It wasn't until Wei Huaigu was imprisoned during the case of Libei's rotten military provisions that the noble clans' embezzlement of state treasury funds in the Xiande years came to light. This deficit had led directly to the fall of Zhongbo.

It was an intricate, complicated web that involved not only officials from Qudu but those from various regional governments. If this instigator had used the same method to place pawns in Juexi and Qidong as well, how many White Scorpions were there operating throughout the empire?

"It's enough to make one's blood run cold," Kong Ling blurted out. "They—"

They had corroded the empire from within.

"There's no need for panic." Shen Zechuan looked around at his advisors. His calm tone scattered the heavy anxiety that had gathered in the air. "The more they tried to do, the easier it would be to give themselves away. Even the most well-laid schemes are bound by the limitations of the mortal body. These kinds of manipulations are time-consuming and labor-intensive; involving too many people is counterproductive. As they say, too many cooks spoil the broth."

Juexi and Qidong were not the same as Zhongbo. The chaos and corruption in Zhongbo were the result of lax administration—but Juexi had Jiang Qingshan, and Qidong had Qi Zhuyin. Everything Jiang Qingshan had done during his investigation into the treasury's deficit with Xue Xiuzhuo would have handicapped the noble clans and White Scorpions working with them. Meanwhile, the grand marshal oversaw all the territories in Qidong. She had a core team under her command as well as Qi Shiyu to assist her in the administration of the region; she would never collude with the Scorpions.

But there was one thing Shen Zechuan was certain of at this moment: Whoever had tampered with the Bianjun Commandery's grain was a White Scorpion hiding in the capital. This Scorpion had not been trying to force Lu Guangbai to rebel but drive him to his death.

Xiao Chiye once again looked at Huo Lingyun. "The Scorpions gave the muskets to King Yi. But who taught you how to use them?"

Firearms weren't as common as sabers or swords. As a native of Dengzhou, Huo Lingyun would likely never have seen one in his life. He would have had to undergo training if he wished to use them with any proficiency. Xiao Chiye had handled muskets before in Qudu and knew this firsthand. At this point it hardly mattered whether King Yi himself knew how to use them—if the man had known Huo Lingyun could fire a gun, he would never have kept him by his side without taking more precautions.

Huo Lingyun pressed his lips into a tight line, his expression solemn. After a moment, he answered, "Old Fang the Tenth."

The muskets had been one of the reasons Fang the Tenth was willing to join hands with Huo Lingyun to remove King Yi. Huo Lingyun was a quick study with the weapons and a regular presence at King Yi's side. Not to mention, he could press King Yi for information on the vault and keep an eye on his movements at all times.

"After you reclaimed Dunzhou, Yang Qiu and Fang the Tenth became uneasy," Huo Lingyun continued. "Once Cizhou reached an agreement with Libei and Qidong, Fanzhou and Dengzhou would be next on the chopping block. They were afraid King Yi couldn't stand up under pressure—that he'd open the gates and surrender. So they decided to make the first move. They planned to off him and empty out the vault."

Huo Lingyun had used the vault as bait and lured Yang Qiu and Fang the Tenth to their deaths in that fire. The money was now in his hands, and he was the only one who knew where it was. Otherwise he might not have had the confidence to negotiate with Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye.

Huo Lingyun's gaze shifted between Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye. "I know how to use firearms. I can teach the Libei Armored Cavalry and the Cizhou Garrison Troops." Then he looked straight at Xiao Chiye and said, "When you march on Duanzhou in the second month, put me in the vanguard. I'll lead the remaining Dengzhou Garrison Troops."

Fei Sheng, who had been kneeling off to the side all this time, scowled. He took a moment to compose himself before speaking. "Master, it's not my place to interrupt, but this matter concerns the safety of both Duanzhou and Er-ye. I must offer up a few words of my own. This man is slippery; it's not appropriate to keep him by my lords' sides. Er-ye doesn't lack generals, and Elder Yin will march with us as well."

He was unusually sincere this time. His misgivings toward Huo Lingyun were not unfounded. Yin Chang had taken Fanzhou. If not for this young man's underhanded tricks, Yin Chang wouldn't have been dressed down and robbed of so much of his reward. Yet now that they held Fanzhou, here Huo Lingyun was claiming the lion's share of the credit, as if their victory was only possible because he had set fire to the vault.

Huo Lingyun was a man who could endure suffering, and so dared to be ruthless. When he struck, it was with efficiency and decisiveness. His vindictiveness was comparable to Shen Zechuan's. Such a man had both a mind for schemes and the ability to see them through. To allow Huo Lingyun

a spot at Shen Zechuan's side was a threat to Fei Sheng—and Fei Sheng had no desire to give Huo Lingyun an opportunity to steal the show.

Fei Sheng was clear on how things worked, and he knew where his own opportunities lay. He only dared interrupt now because he was certain Xiao Chiye didn't like Huo Lingyun.

Sure enough, Xiao Chiye hadn't planned on answering Huo Lingyun at all. He needed the muskets, but he didn't need Huo Lingyun. He—Xiao Ce'an—was the only one allowed to take Duanzhou. He had been in Cizhou for weeks, spending every day at the Beiyuan Training Grounds. He'd donned heavy armor to train with Haerigu's Scorpions, hoping to find a breakthrough that would turn the tide in Libei. If he put Huo Lingyun in the vanguard instead of his own men, it would be a heavy blow to the Libei Armored Cavalry, whose morale was already low.

Shen Zechuan's back was starting to ache from sitting. The raised bite marks on the inside of his thighs had yet to subside. What he had told Xiao Chiye this morning about his mind whirling was not a lie. After these revelations about the White Scorpions, the truth seemed obscured by an even heavier fog. To prepare for the troops' march on Duanzhou, they had to start transporting provisions to Dunzhou this afternoon. And now there was the thorny issue of whether Huo Lingyun could be put to use or not.

"Huo-gongzi has considered things carefully," Yao Wenyu put in to Shen Zechuan. "The Embroidered Uniform Guard has been seeking new recruits recently, have they not, my lord?"

That's right.

Shen Zechuan immediately saw Yao Wenyu's intent. If they placed Huo Lingyun in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, Fei Sheng, who was

already suspicious of him, would keep a tight leash on the young man. And with Qiao Tianya nearby watching over them both, Fei Sheng couldn't run roughshod over Huo Lingyun either. This move would put distance between Huo Lingyun and Shen Zechuan without letting such a resourceful person go to waste. What was more, Qiao Tianya and Huo Lingyun would act as a pair of restraints holding Fei Sheng in check. Fei Sheng was gradually distinguishing himself from the flock, but he needed a reminder not to let his success go to his head.

"Fei Sheng," Shen Zechuan said. "Take your pick from the remaining Dengzhou Garrison Troops. We want everyone who meets your recruitment standards, including this Young Master Huo."

Fei Sheng understood the intent here as well. His heart sank, but he put on a show of gratitude. "I shall of course follow Master's arrangements. But these Dengzhou Garrison Troops are all Huo Lingyun's old acquaintances. They may not be willing to serve in the Embroidered Uniform Guard."

"Then you must entice them with the right rewards." Xiao Chiye turned the ring on his right thumb back to its original position. There was no smile in his eyes. "Once they join the Embroidered Uniform Guard, they will no longer belong to Dengzhou. Their old status in the Dengzhou military can be expunged."

Xiao Chiye said just enough to make his point.

The Imperial Army he'd tamed years ago was a more difficult beast than these Dengzhou Garrison Troops. His method of managing his subordinates had been, from the very beginning, to be fair in meting out rewards and punishments. These leftover soldiers of Dengzhou could make a clean break from their registered place of origin once they joined the

Embroidered Uniform Guard—they could even be exempted from field taxes in Cizhou. As long as they acquitted themselves well with the tasks Shen Zechuan handed out, there was nothing they couldn't have.

Fei Sheng expressed his agreement at once.

It was late by the time the meeting concluded. Qiao Tianya wheeled Yao Wenyu back to his courtyard.

The stone slabs of the paths in the courtyard had all been cleared; not a speck of snow was left on the ground. The servants had gone out of the way to sprinkle salt as well, for fear that the wheelchair might slip on the ice. The newly planted plum blossoms had all withered, the fallen red petals dead in the embrace of their branches. Encased in ice and snow, they painted a bleak and desolate scene. The ground was slippery, so Qiao Tianya walked slowly, keeping the wheelchair steady as he pushed it along.

Yao Wenyu's cat was called Hunu—*pet tiger*. If she was not stretching herself and licking her paws under the eaves, she would be nestled on Yao Wenyu's lap, sleeping soundly with her belly exposed. At present, she was a little bundle of energy as she kneaded Yao Wenyu's sleeves and nuzzled hard against his palm.

He scratched Hunu's chin. The lanterns outside illuminated his profile. He had gained a little weight lately and looked much healthier than when he had first arrived. This was the famed Yao Yuanzhuo of distinguished demeanor and ethereal appearance.

Qiao Tianya did not speak. His gaze caught on Yao Wenyu's collar, then darted to the cuff of Yao Wenyu's sleeves.

They hadn’t exchanged a single word today.

As the wheelchair passed inside, the attendants filed in to deliver hot water. Yao Wenyu sat reading, while Qiao Tianya removed his saber and stood outside, staring at his qin.

At length, the servants withdrew from the room and closed the door gently behind them. Usually, Qiao Tianya personally attended to Yao Wenyu in the bath and accepted no help from others. Yuanzhuo liked to be clean; if he didn’t bathe, he couldn’t sleep. He would always sit quietly while Qiao Tianya dried his hair.

He seemed to have accepted the sorry state he was in, but only to the extent that he allowed Qiao Tianya to care for him; no one else was permitted to see. This was the limit of what he could bear.

Qiao Tianya stood outside for close to an hour before he finally heard Yao Wenyu call out hesitantly from within. “Qiao Songyue.”

He froze, his fingers hovering over the qin strings, but he didn’t respond, as though he hadn’t heard.

The wind chimes stirred beneath the eaves, ushering in the melody of the lonely breeze. Yao Wenyu could see Qiao Tianya’s shadow upon the curtains hanging over the door. He seemed to have been standing there for a very long time.

After a moment of silence, Yao Wenyu continued. “It’s time for bed.”

This time, Qiao Tianya paused, then drew the curtains aside to enter.

The light from the candles was dim. Yao Wenyu preferred the lights low at this hour, for it was the time of day when he was most frail and

helpless. Hunu burrowed into the sheets and swatted playfully at the corner of the blanket, oblivious to the awkwardness in the room.

Yao Wenyu had yet to school his expression when Qiao Tianya bent forward with steady composure and picked him up from the chair. Their clothes whispered against each other, and Qiao Tianya secured Yao Wenyu's arm around his shoulders. As Yao Wenyu's hand brushed Qiao Tianya's back, his fingers curled slightly.

Yuanzhuo was a reserved man, the result of his upbringing as a gentleman of virtue.

Qiao Tianya unfastened the ties in Yao Wenyu's hair. The look in his eyes at this moment was one of pure concentration, so intense Yao Wenyu couldn't bring himself to meet his gaze. He lowered his eyes to avoid Qiao Tianya's searching look. When he had been stripped down to his inner garment, Yao Wenyu muttered softly, "Don't."

Qiao Tianya paused without letting go of the belt he was holding.

Yao Wenyu's fingers suddenly clenched his collar with an expression somewhere between anger and affront. "I said, don't!"

"Don't what?" Qiao Tianya, who had been silent all this while, looked at him with perfect calm.

Yao Wenyu's *don't touch me* caught in his throat. He looked at Qiao Tianya with bloodshot eyes, as though staring down some terrible beast. His hands trembled slightly, yet the word that emerged from his mouth was still, "…Don't."

He pressed his lips into a tight line and pushed against Qiao Tianya's chest, rejecting his touch.

The rattan chair creaked. Green and white flashed in the bronze mirror as dark hair and wide sleeves flailed in Qiao Tianya's arms like spring leaves anxious to escape in the wind. Qiao Tianya let him make a scene. Just as Yao Wenyu was about to slide to the floor, Qiao Tianya overturned the rattan chair, grabbed Yao Wenyu's wrists, and pinned him down onto the rug.

"What do you want?" Qiao Tianya held both of Yao Wenyu's wrists in one hand and gripped his jaw with the other hand, turning his head to face him. "Do you want me to throw you in like this, or leave you here?"

Yao Wenyu was forced to tilt his head up under Qiao Tianya's fingers. His breath quickened as he squeezed his eyes shut, biting down on his lip until it went white. Qiao Tianya released his jaw and pressed his fingers between Yao Wenyu's lips to prevent him from drawing blood. Yao Wenyu ground down on them as if venting his anger.

"What are you afraid of?" Qiao Tianya let him bite, his expression cool. "Last night wasn't your fault."

Last night, Yuanzhuo had been very different. Lax with drink, he had forgotten the pain in his legs and gotten hard under Qiao Tianya's touch in the bath. Even a noble young master was still human; he had lost his legs, not everything that made him a man. He was young yet, and though he kept them to himself, he yet had a young man's unspoken desires. But he didn't even have the opportunity to pleasure himself any more. He was laid bare and exposed to Qiao Tianya's eyes every night—even so, he could never accept how powerless he'd become.

"What's wrong?" Qiao Tianya asked, voice harsh. "Are you aggrieved because I'm not a woman? I wasn't that bad with my hands, was I?"

“Stop it.” Yao Wenyu’s face betrayed his pain. All he could do was to cry dispiritedly as he lay here. “Stop it!”

The rattan chair had rolled to the side in their tussle. It knocked into a small clothing rack, which fell onto Qiao Tianya’s back. Qiao Tianya didn’t even blink. Studying him under the flickering candlelight, Qiao Tianya couldn’t understand what Yao Wenyu was so angry about either.

“How do you view yourself?” Qiao Tianya asked. “Do you think of yourself as a banished immortal? Is it wrong to have desires? You—”

“I don’t!” Yao Wenyu’s eyes had gone thoroughly red. His voice trembled as he strained to speak. “I don’t have that sort of—I don’t need it!”

How could he sink so low; how could he destroy his last shred of dignity? What would he be left with then? His dignity was all he had to his name, and it was this that sustained him so he could sit up straight before everyone in his frail state and withstand their pity.

As Yao Wenyu trembled, tears slid down his cheeks against his will. Just as his legs were no longer able to support him, his tears, too, were beyond his control. He was ashamed to face this side of himself, ashamed to confront whatever remained of his desires.

Chest heaving, Qiao Tianya turned Yao Wenyu over.

Yao Wenyu’s eyes widened in panic as Qiao Tianya pulled him into his arms from behind and tugged open his inner garment. He struggled violently, pushing against Qiao Tianya’s arms as he resisted. “I don’t want it! Let me go, Qiao Songyue, let—”

Qiao Tianya caught Yao Wenyu’s hand in his own and guided it downward. Like this, one hand covering the other, they held Yao Wenyu’s

shame together. He gathered Yao Wenyu into his arms, and as he pressed his head into the crook of Yao Wenyu's neck, he heard Yao Wenyu crying.

The last dim candle had gone out. They clung together in the dark, Yao Wenyu with his face hanging toward the rug, his cheeks wet with tears from the unbearable shame and indignation. A suppressed cry escaped his throat for the dignity he'd lost at Qiao Tianya's hands, and for the clear look he'd gotten at himself. He drew in shuddering breaths between his sobs, his free hand gripping Qiao Tianya's sleeve as the pleasure of being defiled and shattered under the masterful slide of Qiao Tianya's palm washed over him.

"Kill me…" A sob tore from Yao Wenyu as he rasped, "Qiao Songyue… I hate you so much…"

Qiao Tianya's hand glided up and down in the dark, his face pressed to the curve of Yuanzhuo's jaw, listening to his sobs and curses, his gasps and his moans.

"You're not wrong to have desires." As Yao Wenyu shivered, Qiao Tianya whispered into his ear, earnest and hoarse, "So hate me all you want."

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Chapter 204:
Empress Dowager

XIAO CHIYE WAS DUE to march on Duanzhou in the second month. Shen Zechuan sent grain wagons ahead of the troops. In Dunzhou, Tantai Hu made the necessary arrangements; in the north, Xiao Jiming dispatched Wu Ziyu with five thousand cavalrymen to stand by on the northern side of Mount Luo. If Xiao Chiye encountered trouble, they could combine forces with Third Sand Camp and descend on Duanzhou together.

Fine snow danced in the breeze this morning. The city outskirts stretched into the distance, and before them lay an empty, boundless horizon. Xiao Chiye was clad from head to toe in heavy armor, which sank him right through the thin layer of snow on the ground. He looked like an iron wall standing before Shen Zechuan.

“There are still bandits on Mount Luo.” Cloak draped over his shoulders, Shen Zechuan gazed up at Xiao Chiye. “Be careful when you pass through.”

Meng landed on Xiao Chiye’s shoulder. “I will. This has to be a quick battle. I’ll be back in the third month at the latest. If the soldiers you send to Dengzhou aren’t enough, let the marshal know. She can transfer men from Tianfei Watchtower. No problem there.”

Snow brushed past the hair at Shen Zechuan’s temples and settled on his collar. Xiao Chiye laid a hand on the crown of Shen Zechuan’s head. A couplet inexplicably came to mind.

For my wife is still in the springtime of life; tender are the words I speak to comfort my beloved.

Lanzhou was only twenty-two this year; he would be by Xiao Chiye's side for decades to come. For Xiao Chiye, who was destined to fight battles all over the realm with life and death always hanging in the balance, overthinking would merely serve to make him timid.

Shen Zechuan was the reason Xiao Chiye had become as hard as steel, yet he was also the source of Xiao Chiye's softness. Xiao Chiye wanted to protect this man until the very end of his life, and as such, he would give his best in every battle. But even men as strong as Xiao Fangxu might meet unpredictable ends. Xiao Chiye had thought plenty after that incident. He loved this man, but he also worried for him.

Perhaps others in the world didn't need Xiao Ce'an that much—but Shen Lanzhou did.

"I'll be waiting for you here." Shen Zechuan raised his palm to caress Xiao Chiye's cheek. In a soft voice, he said, "Don't dally with anyone else along the way. Not even a glance."

Xiao Chiye surged forward and wrapped Shen Zechuan in an embrace. Standing amid the snow, huffing breaths of hot air, he felt as if he owed Lanzhou so much—too much. The man couldn't even sleep without him.

He nuzzled against Shen Zechuan's temple. "Enthrone yourself in the Hall of Brilliance," he whispered, "and let not the tempest touch you."

Without waiting for Shen Zechuan to answer, Xiao Chiye released him. He put on his helmet, mounted Snowcrest, and turned the horse's head to lead the Libei Armored Cavalry eastward.

Seeing that Shen Zechuan didn’t move, Fei Sheng raised the umbrella to shield him from the snow. Shen Zechuan stood in the fine drifts, clutching his blue handkerchief until silence descended all around.

Qudu had experienced several consecutive days of clear skies. One could even occasionally catch a glimpse of birds flitting between the double-eaved roofs of the imperial palace. The heir apparent was a fast learner. Although she still had no authority to make decisions, she had become accustomed to listening in on discussions of state affairs in Mingli Hall. She spoke rarely, yet behind those sharp eyes, Cen Yu saw her dedication to government affairs.

Li Jianting had cultivated no other hobbies in the last six months save studying and practicing calligraphy. She rose early each day and never rested even when she fell ill. The Chief Surveillance Bureau, which had lectured Li Jianheng heartily in the past, eventually could not find any points on which to admonish Li Jianting. In the eyes of these fastidious censors, she was the closest thing to a proper heir to the throne since the crown prince of the reign of Yongyi. Even Kong Qiu, initially critical of her presence, no longer spoke carelessly of her.

No one knew how Xue Xiuzhuo had done it, but he had killed off the girl Ling Ting completely; now there was only Li Jianting.

The empress dowager had lately been plagued by headaches. The incense usually lit in the hall aggravated them; she instructed Aunt Liuxiang to snuff it out. The gray hairs at her temples had multiplied. At long last, old age was eroding this figure who had rested her hand on the scales of power in

Qudu for thirty years. Faced with Li Jianting's fresh-faced youth, she felt increasingly willing in spirit but lacking in strength.

"Yesterday, Han Cheng presented a memorial to the throne. He's still requesting that troops be deployed to Cizhou." The Helian Marquis sat in the guest's seat and groused, "Conflicts abound even among the people on our own side. Why is he still thinking of Zhongbo!"

The empress dowager let Aunt Liuxiang massage her shoulders as she leaned back on the settee and looked over Han Cheng's memorial. "Shen Zechuan has taken Fanzhou, and now he's set his eyes on Duanzhou too. After spring, he will truly become the tiger of Zhongbo. He hates Han Cheng for the murder of his teacher. It's natural for Han Cheng to be afraid."

The Helian Marquis cared not a whit for Han Cheng's personal feuds. At present, he was anxious over something else. After the ninth month last year, the faction of pragmatists led by Xue Xiuzhuo had collaborated with the Chief Surveillance Bureau to audit the fields of the eight cities in preparation for resurveying the farmlands. This was ostensibly no different from previous years—but in the past, such audits had merely been for show. The officials conducting the inspection tours simply went through the motions before submitting a pre-agreed-upon number to the Grand Secretariat, muddling their way through the process year after year.

This time, it seemed Xue Xiuzhuo was serious.

"I warned you all long ago to tell your fiefs to restrain themselves," the empress dowager said. "But did anyone listen? How many froze to death this last winter alone? Other than the three cities of Dicheng, Jincheng, and Quancheng, which provided disaster relief for their people, everyone else was craven." She tossed the memorial onto the small table before her. The eastern

pearls at her ears swayed. “Why did Pan Lin have to antagonize Xue Xiuzhuo? Yes, Xue Xiuzhuo plans to work with Cen Yu and the others to investigate the fields—but was Pan Lin himself not the one who gave him the opportunity?”

The Helian Marquis had married his daughter, Commandery Princess Zhaoyue, to Pan Lin’s younger brother Pan Yi. The Fei and Pan Clans were now in the same boat; they would sink or swim together. The marquis had considered the marriage insurance against future trouble, given that three members of the Pan Clan—Pan Xiangjie, Pan Lin, and Pan Yi—were all high officials of the imperial court. He simply hadn’t expected Pan Lin to be such a pain in the ass.

The Helian Marquis didn’t dare step in directly to defend Pan Lin and risk sharing the blame, but he couldn’t let his son-in-law’s brother fall from grace like this either. Pan Lin was currently unofficially filling the position of Minister of Revenue. The job he did was crucial, yet he didn’t have the official title in hand. Everyone was fraught with anxiety. If Pan Lin was defeated in this tussle, they would be handing the officials of humble origins the Ministry of Revenue on a silver platter.

“Chengzhi is impatient by nature. I’ve no idea how he offended Xue Xiuzhuo.” The marquis was like an ant on a hot pan, burning with anxiety. He pleaded, “But Pan Xiangjie and Pan Yi are both loyal to Your Majesty, and you watched our Zhaoyue grow up into a lady. She and the third lady are __”

“The gall of you!” The empress dowager cut him off, sitting up to better berate him. “How dare you drag the third lady into these political disputes?! When I wanted Zhaoyue to marry that boy from the Han Clan, you

refused. You insisted on coveting that scrap of advantage the Pan Clan offered you. Now that things have gone south, don't expect me to come rescue you!"

The empress dowager was rarely so angry. The palace maids and eunuchs inside and outside the hall dropped to their knees and prostrated themselves on the ground, holding their breath. Even the Helian Marquis dared not remain seated. He sank to his knees, frantically shuffled forward on the ground, and slapped himself several times on the face. "Your Majesty, please be appeased!"

"The third lady has been married off to Qidong," the empress dowager declared solemnly. "She is Qi Shiyu's lady of the house, his official wife. She has a proper rank now; every word she says and action she takes is under scrutiny. Your fiefs' encroachment on the commoners' fields has nothing to do with her. I don't want to hear of this again. At your age, do you still need me to teach you when to hold your tongue?"

"Yes, of course—of course." The Helian Marquis was not a courageous man. The only lawful descendants of the Fei Clan in this generation were the young marquis, Fei Shi, and Commandery Princess Zhaoyue. Fei Shi spent his days fooling around. Even now, he held no proper official position. Because of this, the Helian Marquis had hesitated over Zhaoyue's marriage for a long time, worrying over every little thing. How could he have guessed that, after all his precautions, trouble would still come knocking?

The empress dowager rose to her feet. Holding an arm out for Aunt Liuxiang to support her, she made her way to the Helian Marquis. The marquis was getting on in years, and all else aside, he was a noble. It was a disgrace for him to keep kneeling like this. The empress dowager recovered

her calm a little more with each step, and finally said, “Get up. This is unbecoming.”

The Helian Marquis scrambled to his feet and stood helplessly by the empress dowager’s side, not daring to come too close.

The empress dowager looked up along the palace eaves at the bright and clear sky. After a moment of thought, she said, “Fei Shi, too, has come of age. If his inclinations do not run to scholarship, he can take the military route. There are many vacancies in the Eight Great Battalions; let him go there and learn. He doesn’t need to carve out a distinguished career. As long as he can temper himself, it will be well worth it. Once he puts in the hours and has a record of service under his belt, he will naturally be promoted into the Ministry of War.”

With this, the empress dowager had prodded the marquis’ sore spot. Fei Shi was his only son, and he had kept the boy sheltered in the inner manor as a child. Since Fei Shi had entered society, he had shown himself adept at all things related to the drinking of wine and the soliciting of courtesans—at anything at all, except learning. What’s more, he was an obstinate man and close friends with Pan Lin. To date, he was unwilling to show Xue Xiuzhuo due respect, instead spending all his days wallowing in vice on Donglong Street. The only one with any power over him was his older sister.

The Helian Marquis’s eyes grew moist, and he lifted his sleeve to wipe his tears. “Your Majesty is the compassionate mother of all under the sky; your graciousness knows no bounds. This humble subject hoped for him to join the Eight Great Battalions as well, but with that temperament of his…” He sighed.

The empress dowager had lost all patience with the Helian Marquis. She knew what he meant. The Eight Great Battalions were no longer the glamorous, lucrative post of past years, when the most they had to manage was Qudu's patrols. Given the situation in Zhongbo, chances were good they'd be deployed to fight in the near future. The Helian Marquis feared Fei Shi would come to harm on the battlefield; he was reluctant to send his only son to give his life for this cause. He had come here hoping the empress dowager could get Fei Shi into the Six Ministries instead.

But Qudu was no longer the playground of the noble clans. Domestic strife was everywhere, and foreign threats were imminent. Qudu had failed to eliminate Shen Zechuan when it had the chance, and he had become the overlord of Zhongbo in six short months, even allying with Libei in the north. If not for the pressing threat of the Biansha Horsemen, he would be knocking on Qudu's door by now. In the southeast, Qi Zhuyin was sending letters requesting permission to deploy her troops against the Qingshu tribe in the fourth month. And here at home, Xue Xiuzhuo was pressing in on them with every step. Although he appeared to be in a private feud with Pan Lin, every one of his impeachment memorials contained legitimate claims backed by solid evidence. The eight cities were indeed encroaching on the commoner's fields, and it would be an uphill battle once the Chief Surveillance Bureau's investigations started in the spring.

Yet even at this stage the Helian Marquis and those like him were only thinking of themselves and those small patches of land that made up their fiefs, fearing they would be confiscated.

During the reign of Xiande, from Hua Siqian to Wei Huaigu, they were never in want of capable ministers or generals. Yet who did they have now?

The Helian Marquis was a bungling oaf, good for nothing; Pan Xiangjie was a fence-sitter who turned wherever the wind blew; and Han Cheng was a rapacious braggart with ambitions of grandeur. Dealing with the Grand Secretariat exhausted the empress dowager both physically and mentally.

"Xue Xiuzhuo's investigation of the eight cities' farmlands is meant to pave the way for the heir apparent's ascension." The look in the empress dowager's eyes was unfathomable. "It is not yet time for the heir apparent to step forward. Go back and make it clear to Pan Xiangjie that he needs to open the granaries in Dancheng and Chuancheng and distribute the grain as aid relief until the day the last snow melts. And tell him to clean up his accounts: Return those unnecessary fields to the people. Xue Xiuzhuo does not have the power to do as he pleases just yet. If he wants to investigate, let him."

"If those accounts fall into his hands, how can we exculpate ourselves?!" the Helian Marquis asked in alarm.

The empress dowager looked at him. "Pan Lin has served in the Ministry of Revenue a long time, and his yearly reviews are always good. He has capable men working under him as well. Xue Xiuzhuo wants to work with the Chief Surveillance Bureau, but even so, he can't sidestep the Ministry of Revenue. The previous year's field records are all there, and they also manage the auditing of the account books. Pan Lin can still dodge the accusations; tell him to appoint someone he trusts to handle the case. Weather this, and Xue Xiuzhuo will find it difficult to force the issue."

The Helian Marquis pondered this. "There's a man under him named Liang Cuishan; Pan Lin's given him guidance before. The Tianchen Emperor promoted him after the incident with the public ditches. This man's review last year was outstanding, and he has a good reputation with the officials of

humble origins. He’s from Qudu, and his background isn’t particularly noteworthy. He’s a convenient pawn.”

“As long as the Pan Clan can survive the worst of this,” the empress dowager said, “things can only improve.”

The appropriation of farmland had occurred in all the eight cities. How clean could the Xue Clan’s Quancheng be? In investigating the eight cities’ fields, Xue Xiuzhuo was directly threatening the noble clans’ interests. It was an audacious move; if the field taxes were subject to serious scrutiny, no doubt heads would roll. The empress dowager was suggesting that Pan Lin use Liang Cuishan to choke off the investigation of the fields in Dancheng. If the investigation stalled and the bookkeeping was sloppy, the Pan Clan could turn the tables and attack Xue Xiuzhuo in the imperial court—perhaps they could even suggest the Chief Surveillance Bureau investigate his Xue Clan’s Quancheng first.

Bathed in the shifting glow of the setting sun, the empress dowager slid the well-worn Buddhist prayer beads off her wrist and tossed them onto the settee. With the incense smoke from the prayer hall rising in spirals behind her, she was the very image of dignity and poise. Her bearing would have belied her old age, had it not been for the gray hair at her temples.

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Chapter 205:
Duanzhou

IT WAS NOT until the second month that Qi Zhuyin received a reply from Qudu. She read it from top to bottom in their manor in Cangjun Commandery, then said to her father, who was lying in bed, “I requested to move on the Qingshu tribe, but the Ministry of War didn’t approve. The empress dowager wants me to wait. She’s concerned about military expenses, but Zhongbo is already marching to war. I’ll miss the golden opportunity if I wait any longer.”

Qi Shiyu was in better health these days. He clutched a handkerchief as he spoke, stuttering. “Y-your…h-hurry.”

Setting the letter down, Qi Zhuyin deliberately distorted his meaning and said, “That’s right. I’m in a hurry. How could I not be? If Libei’s troops are defeated, it won’t benefit Qidong in any way.”

At last Qi Shiyu produced a complete sentence: “What’s your h-hurry?!”

Qi Zhuyin leaned back in her chair. She could hear one of her father’s concubines wailing and making a fuss in the courtyard. Qi Zhuyin had ridden half the night to get here, and had already drunk several cups of strong tea to keep herself awake. Furthermore, she still had to ride back later. These sobs were getting on her last nerve. She said to Qi Shiyu, “Can’t you tell her to shut up?”

The concubine in the courtyard had given Qi Shiyu a son. Now she was the picture of a tear-stained beauty as she leaned on her maidservant and

sobbed loudly in the direction of the room. “My lord! Can’t you even let me see my lord? Oh Marshal, how heartless of you!”

Qi Wei stood still under the eaves watching the woman cry until her eyes were red and swollen and she was almost sliding to the ground. He clicked his tongue and shuffled around to face the wall. Listening to her was giving him a headache.

Qi Shiyu could tell which concubine this was from her wails alone. Before his stroke, he was most tender toward the fairer sex, but now he clenched his handkerchief, chest heaving as he shouted with all his might, “Sh-shut up, y-you hear me?!” He paused to catch his breath and covered the corner of his mouth with the handkerchief. To Qi Zhuyin, he said, “Li-Libei, has no…”

“That was years ago,” Qi Zhuyin answered. “At your age, you’re still holding a grudge against the old prince? He’s gone. And the commanding generals on Libei’s front line are quite an interesting bunch. They’re not what they were a dozen years ago.”

“Then—then Xiao Jiming, and Xiao Chiye…” Speaking was a strain on Qi Shiyu; even he frowned, hearing himself. He pushed out the words: “Can beat A-Amur? If you deploy troops to clean up their mess, the empress dowager will view you with suspicion. Once the battle is over, see how Qudu takes you to t-task!”

Several decades ago now, Qi Shiyu had been the prince charming of a great many of Zhou’s ladies. He came from a distinguished background, and he was handsome to boot. Among the Four Great Generals of the reign of Yongyi, he was the first to make his name in Qidong. Feng Yisheng, yet to distinguish himself, had been a high-ranking officer under his command. Qi

Shiyu had stood a chance at being conferred the title of a prince—but Xiao Fangxu's meteoric rise at Luoxia Pass had overshadowed his achievements. The Libei Armored Cavalry overtook the Qidong Garrison Troops in honor and glory, trampling Qi Shiyu's life's ambitions.

There was no real enmity between them, only rivalry, although they'd once gotten into a physical fight in Qudu long ago. Qi Shiyu had sneered at Xiao Fangxu's humble origins, and Xiao Fangxu had called Qi Shiyu a pretty face with no substance. When Feng Yisheng was still around, he was the oldest among them, and it was due to his relentless efforts, along with Lu Pingyan's, that Qidong and Libei had been brothers for so many years.

Qi Shiyu never accepted defeat, but unfortunately, he had no son and heir of lawful birth. He'd briefly entertained the idea of marrying Qi Zhuyin to Xiao Jiming, but he couldn't get past the rift between their families and never did broach the topic with Xiao Fangxu.

"You think Qudu will take *me* to task?" Qi Zhuyin removed her blade and set it aside. "If Libei is gone, so is Zhongbo, and if Zhongbo is gone, Dancheng is next. Who will the empress dowager take to task for that? Herself? For all their shortcomings, Xiao Jiming and Xiao Chiye are both the old prince's sons. Does Qudu expect to stop the Biansha Horsemen with *Han Cheng*? We might as well perish with the empire."

Rendered speechless, Qi Shiyu wheezed for breath.

Qi Zhuyin poured a cup of tea and continued, "You'd better rest for a while."

"No!" Qi Shiyu's natural obstinance took over as he childishly tossed his handkerchief at Qi Zhuyin. "Foolish girl! Bar-bargain with the empress

dowager. You should at least have a noble title to your name before you g-go to war!”

Qi Zhuyin fell silent. She knew this was Qi Shiyu’s way of showing care for her. She had served as the grand marshal of Qidong’s five commanderies for years, yet still held no noble rank. If she were injured or incapacitated, it would take merely one order from Qudu to remove her from the post.

“At the very least, y-you’d have a title in life, and…” Qi Shiyu’s voice faltered. “…status in death!”

It was true; without a title, once she passed, Qi Zhuyin would be no more than a nameless daughter of the Qi clan. No matter how illustrious her military career, she couldn’t leave her rightful name and title behind for posterity. Qi Zhuyin studied the pattern on her teacup. “A soldier knows only to die on the battlefield for their country; why should they concern themselves with the return of their body home after?[1] If I die in battle, carve my name on a memorial tablet at home—it’s all the same.” She raised her head and smiled at Qi Shiyu. “Our Qidong is under their control; every move we make must be discussed with Qudu. As long as the empress dowager agrees to the provisions, I can do without the title. It is what it is.”

Perhaps old age had finally caught up with Qi Shiyu. He suddenly began to weep. He swatted away Qi Zhuyin’s hand when she tried to wipe his tears for him, hanging his head as he choked with sobs. “If only you were a boy.”

Qi Zhuyin folded the handkerchief and set it beside the bed. She waited for Qi Shiyu to regain his composure, then continued. “Many of our brothers have died in battle. Can each and every one of them leave behind a legacy?

General Feng wasn't conferred a title either, was he? I'm telling you this so you know how things stand. We really are going to war this year. A few months ago, I heard Chen Zhen, the Minister of War, was ill. His poor health is part of the reason the Ministry of War didn't approve my request to mobilize troops. Once he steps down, we'll have no one left on our side in Qudu. It'll be even harder to ask for money and provisions then. We should save as much as we can at home. Stop letting yourself be swayed by pillow talk. Those concubines of yours all have fiefs and shops to their names. Even if I die, they and your sons won't starve to death."

Qi Shiyu huffed. "A-all the properties I gave you were—"

"Used to make up for the shortfall in military funding." After a moment of thought, Qi Zhuyin comforted him with, "I did keep a small plot of land. My mother used to plant flowers and herbs there; I couldn't bear to sell it. It's enough for me to make a living off of."

The concubine outside had gone quiet. The afternoon was overcast. Thick clouds covered the sky, and the interior of the room, shrouded by drapes, was even dimmer. Qi Shiyu gazed at his daughter from his sickbed. The weak light from the window silhouetted her slim shoulders and caught on his late wife's hairpin adorning her hair.

Qi Zhuyin resembled her mother. When her features weren't dominated by her imposing aura—when she was smiling—she had a distinctly feminine charm. The marshal was not as stonily handsome as the rumors made out.

She waited until Qi Shiyu fell asleep before she left. After changing her shoes on the veranda, she stepped out into the snow in her deerskin boots.

"Where'd she go?" she asked Qi Wei.

“The mistress called her away,” Qi Wei answered, keeping pace with her as he walked.

Qi Zhuyin hadn’t seen Hua Xiangyi since her return, and now she hesitated for a moment. As she passed Hua Xiangyi’s courtyard, she heard sweet voices, like the delicate calls of orioles and sparrows, from within. From where she stood on the far side of the arching moon gate, she glimpsed Hua Xiangyi between the gaps of plum blossom branches.

The lady of the house was bundled up in a fox-fur coat today. Judging by the quality of the material, she had likely brought it from Qudu. It was a pure, unadulterated white, and the thick, fine fur framing her cheeks complemented her eyes, clear as the autumn waters, so that they appeared even brighter. She had the look of a girl who’d grown up pampered, wanting for nothing. The fingertips she rested on the plum blossom branch before her were fair and dainty, as if they had never been tarnished with a speck of dust in her life. For reasons she didn’t understand, Qi Zhuyin stood, head turned, and watched for a long time.

“—our bookkeeper has already prepared the account books and is waiting for you in the office. The household expenditure last year…” Having spoken to this point, Qi Wei looked up to see that Qi Zhuyin had not stirred from her spot. He followed her gaze.

Qi Zhuyin raised Banisher and blocked his view.

On the other side of the gate, Hua Xiangyi plucked the plum branch. A painted blossom adorned the space between her brows. She laughed at something her maidservant whispered in her ear, then turned and glided out of sight.

Head still turned, Qi Zhuyin said, “Let’s go.”

“Let’s go?” Qi Wei echoed, baffled.

Qi Zhuyin strode ahead. Qi Wei, yet to make heads or tails of the marshal’s behavior and not daring to ask, followed. Qi Zhuyin headed straight to the office to reconcile the books with the bookkeeper. There was no time to sit; she simply stood at the desk and flipped through the pages.

“Do we have a new steward?” Qi Zhuyin suddenly asked.

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The bookkeeper hunched over and answered in a small voice, “No, Marshal.”

“Strange.” Qi Zhuyin flipped a few more pages. “These accounts have always been a mess; our records couldn’t be vaguer if they tried. Why are last year’s accounts so neat?”

The accounts were more than just neat. This year’s advances had been written out in a separate book, the expenses of the various branches of the family listed out precisely. Her father’s concubines’ cosmetics spending had been halved again on top of the restriction Qi Zhuyin placed on them, and even the properties Qi Shiyu himself couldn’t make sense of had been accounted for. These pages were more beautifully laid out than those from the Ministry of Revenue.

“The marshal is correct. Before, our household accounts were a convoluted mess. The ladies were unable to give detailed accounts of their spending, and our clerks were at a loss for where to start.” The bookkeeper offered Qi Zhuyin a teacup with both hands. “You previously asked everyone to tighten their belts. But we couldn’t get a clear figure on the earnings from our rural properties, and the monthly tributes were a mess because they were mixed in with our logistical expenses.”

Qi Zhuyin raised her eyes to the bookkeeper.

“The mistress was the one who tallied the accounts this time.” Afraid of incurring Qi Zhuyin’s displeasure, he hurriedly added, “She manages the inner courtyards and the domestic affairs, so she looks through the accounts of all the ladies. She specifically sent someone to tell us the records were too messy, and that we must redo them for the sake of your upcoming military budgets. We tried to reconcile them a few times, but the outcry from the

ladies was too much. Many of them were concealing the income from their properties and refusing to come clean!”

She wasn’t surprised. Her father’s concubines were all afraid he would kick the bucket, and so they kept a tight hold on the rural properties and shops under their names. As if that wasn’t enough, they’d been fishing for more and more from the main house and refusing to speak the truth when it was time to settle accounts. Qi Zhuyin didn’t live at home in the inner courtyard, and her trusted subordinates like Qi Wei were not immediate family, and men to boot; it was inappropriate for them to intervene. These accounts gave her a headache every time she thought of them.

It seems this Third Lady Hua is rather capable.

Qi Zhuyin took the account book. “And the ladies all fell in line, just like that?”

“At first, they pulled long faces and gave her a hard time,” the bookkeeper said. “They’ve all given birth to young masters, so they were counting on my lord’s affections. Not only did they refuse to hand over their ledgers, they even went to my lord’s courtyard to kick up a ruckus when we asked. It was the marshal who sent Miss Hongying to serve the mistress, wasn’t it? The mistress had Miss Hongying bring the ladies who’d fainted from sobbing too hard back to her own courtyard and called for a physician to examine them. The physician couldn’t find anything wrong with them, so the mistress had them all buried right there in the courtyard.”

It took a while for Qi Zhuyin to make sense of this statement. “*Buried* in the courtyard?”

“Buried up to their necks!” the bookkeeper said. “It was wonderful. The ladies cried themselves hoarse and said they were going to lodge a

complaint with the marshal."

"Huh? With *me*?"

"So she gave them horses, opened up the gates, and told them to go."

These concubines all required a fleet of servants just to get dressed; not one of them knew how to ride a horse—Qi Shiyu had no interest in women like that. Despite the harsh winter weather, Hua Xiangyi buried anyone caught wailing at Qi Shiyu's door neck-deep in her own courtyard like she was planting radishes. In no time, the concubines fainted in earnest from the freezing cold.

The matrons by Hua Xiangyi's side were all old hands the empress dowager had personally selected. They had plenty of tricks up their sleeves. Whenever the concubines dared make a scene, they taught the women a hard lesson. The concubines knelt along the walkway and waited to speak to the mistress, but they never caught so much as a glimpse of Hua Xiangyi's face. When the concubines gave up and returned to their own courtyards in tears, their sons took up the cause.

"Oh, it's the young masters," Hua Xiangyi had said gently from behind the screen. "A few days ago someone came to our door to hound us for the several hundred taels of silver you owe them. Well, that simply wouldn't do. As the lady of the house, I felt sorry for you all, so I asked the aunties here with me to make up the payment. Don't worry. All the debt slips have handprints and signatures on them. I've got them tucked away for safekeeping in case the creditors claim they never received the payment and come looking for my lord… Boys, are you leaving so soon?"

"And that was how it went." The bookkeeper finished with relish. "The mistress holds the young masters' debts in her hands. She only has to file the

debt slips with us, and the young masters' shops will all be transferred to her as collateral. How would they still dare make trouble now?"

Qi Zhuyin closed the account book, stood for a moment, then opened it again. "Quite the temper she has."

This account book had indeed been tidied up beautifully. Qi Zhuyin couldn't help but wonder: If Qidong's military accounts were this well presented, would she need to fear those wily old foxes from the Ministry of Revenue? But Hua Xiangyi was, after all, the empress dowager's pride and joy. After thinking about it a minute longer, she dropped the idea.

The snow subsided in the second month, and sunny days in Cizhou became more frequent. Whenever Shen Zechuan had free time, he brought Yao Wenyu to the outskirts of the city for a stroll.

It was cloudless for miles around, the sky a bright, clear azure blue. The snow blanketing the forest had begun to melt, and thawing stream water made gentle music over the rocks. There were new signs of wildlife in the woods. Ding Tao had been tasked with letting Frostfall out to pasture, so he brought Li Xiong along to play at the edge of the forest.

"You haven't looked well these last few days." Shen Zechuan wiped his fingers clean with a handful of snow and cast a glance at Yao Wenyu. "Are you not sleeping at night?"

Yao Wenyu's pale profile was reflected in the frosty leaves. He smiled. "It's cold, and my legs are hurting, that's all." He paused. "It has been half a month since Er-ye arrived in Dunzhou. Has Your Lordship received any news?"

“Tantai Hu discovered some pockets of bandits wandering the area around Mount Luo. Ce’an was delayed there for a few days. They reported the night before last that they cleared out the bandits, and the Libei Armored Cavalry has occupied Mount Luo.” Today, Shen Zechuan was wearing a narrow-sleeved robe in a pale jade, with a long velvet coat that made him look especially youthful. A dog-hide armguard was wrapped around his right arm. He whistled as he raised it, and Meng came spiraling down from the treetops to land.

Meng was too heavy; Shen Zechuan could only let him perch for a moment. The tireless messenger bird had been traveling to and fro, so Shen Zechuan fed him some unseasoned meat before letting him fly off to play.

“Mount Luo was never going to give us much trouble.” Yao Wenyu watched Meng fly away. “The difficulty lies with Duanzhou.”

Duanzhou’s long border ran right along the Chashi River, and the prefecture had been completely infiltrated by the Biansha Horsemen in the past few years. No one knew how many Scorpions lurked within. Xiao Chiye had only taken five thousand soldiers of the Imperial Army with him; the rest of the troops were made up of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Unwilling to give up the heavy armor of Libei completely, he hoped to find a way to use it against the Scorpions in Duanzhou.

And Duanzhou was where Shen Zechuan’s heart hung.

Noting Shen Zechuan’s grave expression, Yao Wenyu said soothingly, “Now that the relay stations are connected and running smoothly again, we can send reinforcements immediately if there’s any change in the situation. Besides, Er-ye is a man blessed by heaven.”

“Lu Guangbai said Amur is planting crops on the other side of the Chashi River.” Shen Zechuan pushed aside a withered branch near his head as he walked. “My concern is that he has long been wary of Zhongbo, and his placement of the fields near Gedal signals his preparation to fight a protracted war in Duanzhou.”

Libei could not afford any delay. If they couldn’t capture Duanzhou now, Third Sand Camp’s position would become even more precarious, and Zhongbo would be unable to completely shut their gates. Amur had set his sights so broadly that Shen Zechuan had a feeling he’d considered everything from north to south. He couldn’t help thinking back to last year’s battles, when Amur sent Huhelu to hold down Guo Weili specifically to give Hassen time to head north. At the time, the Scorpions’ infiltration of Zhongbo and their smuggling of supplies had all been to prepare for the attack on Libei’s camps. Now that Hassen had taken Xiao Fangxu out of the equation and reduced the pressure on the northern battlefields, Amur would have more energy to confront Qi Zhuyin. He would rely on the Scorpions to hold Libei in check, then send his cavalry to keep Qi Zhuyin locked down in Qidong, leaving Zhongbo the vulnerable underbelly of the empire. As soon as he could get a hand free, he would bring it down on the battlefront that had only just stabilized.

The battle in Duanzhou would be a tough one.

Yao Wenyu was about to say more when Fei Sheng rode up. He dismounted and bowed to Shen Zechuan. “Master, Yan Heru is here.”

Qudu had just finished auditing Hezhou’s transportation of the government’s grain levies, so presumably, Yan Heru had come to whine about

it. Moreover, they had yet to come to an agreement regarding the new port in Juexi. Shen Zechuan turned. “Let’s head back.”

Yan Heru had indeed come to whine. He’d arrived too late to catch Shen Zechuan, and Zhou Gui and the others sat with him briefly to discuss some of the logistics of the new port in Liuzhou. By the time Shen Zechuan returned, he’d vented most of his grievances and was able to tell him about the inspection of the grain levy shipments in Hezhou with relative coherence.

“The Ministry of Revenue sent a guy called Liang Cuishan to oversee the grain levy in Hezhou. He led the collection of salt taxes in Juexi too. Last year, he and Jiang Qingshan whipped all thirteen cities into shape. It’s thanks to these two our business has been tough.” Yan Heru shifted in the hard chair, then continued brightly, “I’m telling you, Your Lordship, they had me real worried there! This guy’s not easy to deal with—he isn’t the sort who knows how to take a bribe. But you’ll never guess what happened. Before I could even think of a plan to deal with him, he was transferred away. They said he was sent off to the Court of Judicial Review to investigate the fields in Dancheng. For once that imperial court has done me a favor!”

“Liang Cuishan?” Shen Zechuan found the name familiar.

“Liang Cuishan, courtesy name Chongshen.” Yan Heru slumped over the table and winked up at Shen Zechuan. “You know him? You should’ve said so sooner! Then I wouldn’t have had to worry so much.”

Of course Shen Zechuan knew him. He himself had told Xiao Chiye to recommend Liang Cuishan for promotion after the public ditches incident. “They transferred him to Dancheng to investigate the fields?”

“That’s right. Pan Lin is duking it out with Xue Xiuzhuo in court right now. Xue Xiuzhuo has balls of steel to be poking the hornet’s nest like that,” Yan Heru said dramatically, pausing for effect. “Your Lordship, can you even guess how much farmland the eight cities have stolen from the commoners over the years? If Xue Xiuzhuo actually gets to the bottom of those accounts, even the empress dowager could be taken to task—imagine what will happen to the Pan Clan. All the noble clans want Xue Xiuzhuo dead.”

The noble clans’ appropriation of commoners’ fields had led to a surge of displaced migrants. Many of those who had flocked to Zhongbo last year were commoners forced to leave their homes for this reason. Qi Huilian had implemented the Yellow Register as a way to curb the problem, but even this had proved ineffective within the eight cities. Now, Xue Xiuzhuo was using Yao Wenyu’s narrow escape as an excuse to deal the first blow to the Pan Clan of Dancheng.

Even Yao Wenyu had to concede that Xue Xiuzhuo had guts.

“Pan Lin promoted Liang Cuishan.” Shen Zechuan understood in a flash. “The noble clans want Liang Cuishan to use his authority in the Ministry of Revenue to obstruct Xue Xiuzhuo’s investigation. They’re likely hoping to drag things out until spring.”

“What a fine little pissing contest. Let them fight to the death, then.” Yan Heru clapped his hands lightly and grinned at Shen Zechuan. “Best if they keep fighting until Zhongbo gains a foothold, no? By then, Your Lordship will be ready to teach them a lesson!”

“I fear you’ll be disappointed.” Raising his fan, Shen Zechuan pushed away Yan Heru’s fingers that had made their way too close across the table. “This Liang Cuishan—”

Voices rang out under the eaves. Shen Zechuan fell silent as the gentlemen in the room all looked over. Zhou Gui rose from his seat. “What is this clamor? A discussion is underway in the hall!”

A pale-faced Fei Sheng lifted the hanging screen, his gaze skimming past the others and landing on Shen Zechuan. “Master…”

A gust of wind escaped the dark vault of heaven and funneled through the open doorway with such force all the gentlemen raised their sleeves to shield their faces. Shen Zechuan was already on his feet. He could see in Fei Sheng’s eyes that something was wrong. He took a few steps forward and stared at Fei Sheng under the flickering candlelight, as if to confirm his guess.

“An urgent report from the front line,” Fei Sheng said in a grim voice. “It’s Er-ye.”

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Chapter 206:
Frozen River

TANTAI HU'S SCOUTS in Duanzhou had lost communication with Xiao Chiye completely three days ago. He and his vanguard squad had encountered the Scorpion Achi's men near the Chashi River and lost badly. After that, the vanguard had vanished in the snow. The scouts couldn't find any trace of them—they seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

The Biansha Horsemen had set up a perimeter on the west bank of the Chashi River, and he and his vanguard squad were besieged, hemmed in by Achi against the water. Tantai Hu had no way of searching the battlefields, and so all he could do, besides waiting anxiously, was send the brutal news to the Libei homeland and Cizhou.

They couldn't afford to wait and hope. If Xiao Chiye was trapped or injured, Wu Ziyu needed to immediately notify Guo Weili at Third Sand Camp, and Libei's forces would have to ride south at once to stop up the gaping hole in their defenses that was Mount Luo. If the Biansha troops broke through there, the consequences would be unimaginable.

Shen Zechuan didn't bother with the carriage; he mounted Frostfall and set off at a gallop. When he arrived at Mount Luo, it was the dead of night. Wu Ziyu hurried out to receive him and saw no expression on the prefectural governor's bloodless face.

"Your Lordship." Not daring to engage in idle chatter, Wu Ziyu cut to the chase as he followed Shen Zechuan into the campground. "The Horsemen were on the southeast side of Duanzhou. We think they originally intended to

stop Tantai Hu, who is still in the west, from proceeding eastward. Er-ye must still be in the southeast."

Shen Zechuan stood at the entrance of the camp, his shoulders mantled in snow. "Who are the attendant officers with him?"

"Gu Jin, Yin Chang, and Haerigu," Wu Ziyu answered. "Tantai Hu is the only one Er-ye ordered to stay put."

"Master," Fei Sheng put in from behind him. "Why not let the Embroidered Uniform Guard race over to Tantai Hu's camp? We'll take some men and scout. By tomorrow night—"

But Shen Zechuan had already whirled around. He swung astride his horse once more and said to Wu Ziyu, "Send a letter to Yu Xiaozai and Kong Ling. Tell them to seal off all the roads heading west out of Zhongbo, now. Direct any merchants traveling to the trade market to take a detour from Cizhou."

Yan Heru, who had followed him, had only just stepped out of his carriage. His backside was still numb from the journey when he heard Shen Zechuan's words and staggered after the horse. He was eager to do business with Fanzhou and Dengzhou, especially now that both prefectures were suffering a shortage of grain and clothing. "Your Lordship, hey, let's talk about this. Can you at least allow grain from Hezhou into Fanzhou and Dengzhou? If so, maybe we—"

"Sure." Shen Zechuan's gaze was icy. He bent and patted Yan Heru's cheek with the handle of his riding crop. "Grain is fine. But if your little cohort of merchants dares smuggle a single extra trinket into the east of Zhongbo without my express approval, I'll hang your head on the parapets of Hezhou."

The remaining bandits in Fanzhou and Dengzhou had not yet been eradicated; who knew what tricks Yan Heru would get up to? Shen Zechuan was too preoccupied at the moment to keep an eye on him, but he had ways to make Yan Heru behave.

Yan Heru didn't move a muscle. He meekly swallowed, afraid to even blink. Only once Shen Zechuan turned his horse around did Yan Heru realize his legs were trembling.

A saker falcon knifed through the dancing snow and circled the banks of the Chashi River. The sky at dusk was gloomy, and the snow looked like crushed grains of rice as it scattered over the ground. Snowflakes stuck to Bayim's temples, cold and clammy. The rocky desert stretched endlessly toward the horizon. He sat on his horse, one of his books tucked under one arm, and gazed out into the distance.

"Blizzard tonight," he muttered in the Biansha tongue.

The world was a landscape trapped in ice. Even bundled in his furs, Bayim shivered in this cold. Yet Achi was squatting on the frozen Chashi River, washing his face with water from a hole in the ice. His fingers stained the water bloodred as he rubbed them clean.

"I'll send you across the river tonight." A tattooed scorpion crawled up Achi's right arm. His face, as dark as Bayim's, was bluff and honest.

Bayim was Hassen's wise man, his advisor. He had initially worked under Huhelu, but Hassen had transferred him to Achi's squad to observe the Duanzhou battle. He was acting as Hassen's eyes on the ground.

Xiao Chiye had reached Duanzhou seven days ago. His brief siege of the city had ended in failure. The Biansha Horsemen had learned to use the weapons and equipment inside the walls of Duanzhou. They occupied the city and left Xiao Chiye in the cold outside the gates to wear him down. Three days ago, Xiao Chiye had launched a surprise attack. Achi rode out of the city to meet him. He had chased Xiao Chiye's forces to the Chashi River, where he destroyed the left flank of the Libei Armored Cavalry's vanguard.

Bayim looked over his shoulder at Achi. "Perhaps I should stay a few more days."

"Hassen needs you." Achi lifted the severed head of a Libei soldier hanging from his belt and stood, calling to the Scorpions on the bank of the river, "The Libei Armored Cavalry is on its last legs! These wolves are helpless against us. Last night is proof. They were weak even before the new year, and they're no better now."

Achi tossed the head away. "The armored cavalry are no longer our trophies—they're not worthy."

The Scorpions, mingling among the horsemen, followed Achi's lead and booed as they threw away the heads hanging from their saddles. They'd also collected the helmets of the fallen dead to use as chamber pots in the wilderness.

Achi turned to Bayim. "We are Scorpions. It's no good for our esuhuri to keep us in Zhongbo. Once I kill Xiao Chiye, tell Hassen to transfer me back to the northern front. That's where I should be."

Amur had left this elite force stationed in Duanzhou. Achi was Haerigu's successor, the leader of the Black Scorpions. After the death of Jida, he had become the undisputed despot of Duanzhou. But if he wanted

land of his own, he had to distinguish himself on the battlefield. He was unhappy with Amur's decision to keep him stationed in Duanzhou.

"You men are the natural predators of the wolf pack," Bayim said to placate him. "The esuhuri has his own considerations, I'm sure."

"What he's doing is making room for Hassen in the north." Achi's expression was gloomy. "Hassen stole the credit from the Scorpions."

Bayim was on his own out here; he couldn't afford to start a dispute with Achi. He swallowed his frustration and joined Achi as he mounted his horse and stepped back out onto the icy surface of the Chashi River with the Scorpions.

The Chashi River froze over in winter, its ice solid enough to bear the weight of the horsemen. In the past, they had always preferred to make this crossing in winter and thus avoid a long detour. The slender waist of the Chashi River ran close to Gedal. If they moved fast, they could cross the river in a single night.

The snow was growing heavier. Afraid his book would get wet, Bayim stowed it in his leather satchel. He wore a leather hat and a fur collar wrapped tight around his nose and mouth, but even so, it was so cold his ears were chapped from exposure.

"Spring had better come soon," Achi said as he rode beside Bayim. "Too many in Gedal have died of starvation this winter. All the grain they grew went to the northern front."

"If Biansha wishes to become the king of beasts, these are battles we must fight. We don't have enough farmland," Bayim said, voice muffled by his collar. "There's not enough fertile land in the desert. We can only survive

by marching westward. Zhongbo is a good place. You needn't hate it so much."

"If my troops set down their iron hammers, they will once again be reduced to the other tribes' slaves." The iron hammer on Achi's saddle was stained with dried blood. He shook his head. "We will not farm."

Achi, as the Scorpions' leader, had negotiated with Amur. The Scorpions wanted lands and a name of their own. If possible, they wanted to be acknowledged as part of the Twelve Tribes and no longer serve the others. Amur had refused. He demanded the Scorpions crush the Libei Armored Cavalry in this battle. Only after Libei fell would he consider Achi's proposal.

Bayim was merely part of Hassen's retinue. It wasn't his place to question the great esuhuri himself, but he understood Amur's intent. Amur was unwilling to give the Scorpions a name because he wanted to control them. Only then would these homeless bastards truly put in the work.

The troops rode over the ice for four hours. The snowstorm obscured their vision, but the Biansha Horsemen had left behind plenty of route markers. Achi didn't stop, even in the dark. He wanted to escort Bayim to the opposite bank as soon as possible, then head back to quash the remaining Libei Armored Cavalry and clean up the Duanzhou battlefield.

Xiao Chiye hadn't yet made a name for himself, but he was a wolf pup through and through. It was to the regret of all Biansha that Hassen hadn't brought back Xiao Fangxu's head. Achi had his gaze locked firmly on Xiao Chiye. His head would be the perfect bargaining chip to reopen negotiations with Amur. Biansha had spent too long relentlessly attacking Libei; they were

fed up with the stalemate on the northern front. Achi wanted to be the one to break it.

Bayim moved his fur collar aside and gulped a few mouthfuls of water. The wind and snow made it difficult to even open his eyes. As he re-covered his face, he shouted, “Let’s stop for now and rest. The snow is too heavy!”

Unable to fly in the storm, the saker falcon crouched on its master’s shoulder. The wind blew snowdrifts against the ice, which creaked under their hooves with every step. Achi dismounted to scout the path ahead. He scraped away the ice that had formed on the route markers, only to discover footprints in the snow.

Given the fierceness of the storm, there were only two explanations for these tracks. Either the tread that made them was so heavy it had compacted the snow underneath, or whoever left them had passed this way not long ago and was standing just beside them across the thick curtain of snow.

“The wolf is coming.” Achi estimated the depth of the footprint with a finger, then raised his head. “The armored cavalry’s been here!”

Bayim waded through the snow, huffing and puffing as he knelt to look at the footprints. “These are heading west. Back toward Zhongbo.”

The footprints were all facing the direction they had come from.

“Three days ago, you destroyed the left flank of the Libei Armored Cavalry.” Bayim looked toward Achi. “But the vanguard squad is still alive. Xiao Chiye likely escaped with them onto the frozen river. They’re looking for the way back.”

“It could be a ruse.” Achi brushed at the snow. “Maybe they walked backward and hid up ahead to lay an ambush.”

Bayim shook his head, frowning as he stared down at the snow. “It does them no good to head east. That’s our territory.”

Achi brushed aside more snow, following the direction of the footprints. They were indeed all leading west. He was well aware of how Xiao Chiye had taken Huhelu down. He was a man adept at deception; the more obvious the footprints, the more certain he was Xiao Chiye was right in front of them.

“We’ll take a detour.” Achi got to his feet. “Even if Xiao Chiye stays on the ice, he can’t go without water to drink. They’ll leave traces. Let’s follow their tracks.”

Bayim chased after Achi. Now wasn’t the opportune time to cross swords with the Libei Armored Cavalry. “If we don’t stop here to rest, we should at least continue to head east! Achi, Zhou has a saying: ‘Do not corner a starving dog.’ Don’t get led astray by this. Let’s return to Gedal before making any more plans.”

Achi shoved Bayim aside. He lifted a sleeve to expose the scorpion on his right arm, a murderous flame blazing in his eyes. “The wolves are right here in the snow. If we let them go now, they’ll become a real problem. You have no idea how to fight a war. If we let Xiao Chiye remain alive on this river, who’s to say he won’t ambush my men tomorrow morning?!”

Watching Achi mount his horse, Bayim couldn’t help shouting in exasperation, “I once advised Huhelu, but did he listen to me?! In the end, he didn’t even leave a corpse behind!”

“Was this how you advised Hassen too?” Dripping contempt, Achi turned his horse and said, “He lost the king wolf’s head to preserve his own life.”

He cracked his whip and took off southeast.

“Achi!” Bayim chased after him for a few steps, then spat onto the ice and cursed. “Bastard! You’ll lose your way once you leave the route markers.”

Achi galloped through the snow. If he couldn’t find his way on the ice, then—he was certain—neither could Xiao Chiye. But of the two of them, he was more familiar with the Chashi River.

The wolf was close by.

And Achi was going to catch him.

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Chapter 207:
Duped

GU JIN HAD LAIN face-down on the ice for an hour now. Hail from the snowstorm pummeled his armor, an irregular staccato beat. He remained motionless. If not for his eagle eyes blinking, Yin Chang would have guessed he'd frozen to death.

The old general huddled in the snow, taking small sips from his wineskin. It didn't take long for the skin to run dry. He shook it and tipped the dregs into his mouth. Flying snow pelted his cheeks. The old man's hair and beard were white; only his nose remained red.

The wind howled across the dark, making a terrible din and numbing the tips of their ears. The Imperial Army had eaten the last of their rations hours ago; their stomachs were hollow, and though their limbs grew stiff after such a long time sprawled in the snow, they rarely moved.

Yin Chang turned back to cast a glance at the Imperial Army and marveled.

When they had faced the Scorpions a few days ago, the Imperial Army hadn't so much as blinked. Without a word from Xiao Chiye, these men wouldn't move a muscle. Who could still associate them with the ruffian soldiers from Qudu who were only good for manual labor? If the Cizhou Garrison Troops could be transformed as the Imperial Army had been, then forget Duanzhou—Yin Chang would dare to take on Gedal itself.

A pity these were not his soldiers.

Yin Chang pouted and tied the wineskin back onto his belt.

Snow had accumulated on Gu Jin’s back. His head was bare, and the snow melted on his neck and trickled down into his collar. He was listening for minuscule movements amid the howl of the gale. Fragments of ice swirled and scraped across the drifts. Gu Jin’s hand, pressed into the snow, suddenly clenched into a fist. His eyes bored through the snow flying like sand and locked onto a spot in the darkness.

“They’re coming!”

Yin Chang lay flat on the ground and breathed shallowly as the sounds of hoofbeats drew nearer. The old man’s palms were sweating. He counted in silence, fearing his legs might start shaking from overexcitement.

The snow kicked up by the ponies’ hooves turned the fog into thick white clouds; the ponies were so close they were about to stomp on the soldiers’ faces. With a thunderous bellow, Yin Chang sprang up from the ground.

The enemy suddenly stopped.

Yin Chang’s blade was still only half out of his sheath when a Scorpion’s hammer swung toward him, passing inches from his face. Yin Chang didn’t have the arm strength of a brute like Li Xiong; he didn’t dare block the blow. He dropped and rolled in the snow, dodging gracelessly.

“Motherfucker, that’s a good swing!” Yin Chang cursed as he steadied himself.

The Imperial Army soldiers leapt out of the snow behind him. Initially they had wanted to imitate Yin Chang and spring up in one suave move, but on seeing the old man bested, they gave up the idea and drew their blades without the fanfare.

The instant the Scorpions swung their hammers, they knew they had fallen for the trap. This wasn't the Libei Armored Cavalry at all, but a bunch of imposters in helmets!

"Helmets off!" Gu Jin grabbed for the saddle of a pony speeding past him. Feet scraping across the fallen snow, he slammed the hilt of his blade hard into the side of the rider, then clambered up and seized his mount. He called again sternly, "Helmets off!"

Helmets clattered to the snow as the Imperial Army darted into the group of horsemen like a nest of mice. They didn't care where the Biansha soldiers tried to run as long as they could startle the Biansha ponies. The snow under their hooves was loose; it scattered as a net was pulled up, toppling a number of Biansha mounts.

Snow and sand flew into the enemies' faces. Achi's soldiers swallowed mouthfuls of ice and snow as they tumbled.

The Imperial Army's blades were short. Once they closed in on the Scorpions, the iron hammers lost their effectiveness. Whether the Scorpions swung them wide or held them in tight, the Imperial Army's blades were faster, giving their enemy no time at all to parry the blows.

Gu Jin scanned the battlefield but saw no sign of Achi. His heart sank. Before he could call a warning, a line of Biansha Horsemen came bolting out of the snow on his left, so fast Gu Jin had no time to dodge.

This vicious beast seemed to have materialized out of thin air. It clamped its teeth on the Imperial Army, breaking them up into disconnected pieces. The new unit didn't wield iron hammers. In their swift and ferocious advance, they knocked Gu Jin right off his stolen pony. As Gu Jin hit the ground, the pony screeched in agony; hot blood sprayed his face.

“Sneaks!” Achi rebuked Gu Jin in the Zhou tongue. He brandished his scimitar and flung droplets of blood onto Gu Jin. “But that’s all you are.”

The scimitars of Achi’s elite Scorpions were larger than those used by the rest of the Biansha Horsemen. In their hands, the weapons looked like thick, silver hooks. Get caught by that deadly curve, and human and beast alike would meet their end.

Achi had smelled a rat even as he was following the trail. There were far too many clues exposing the enemy’s presence. Very quickly, Achi’s windblown brain had calmed. He’d sent his scouts ahead to probe, and sure enough, they had baited the Imperial Army out of hiding.

Gu Jin wiped blood off his face and answered lightly, “Is that so?”

On the other side of the tussle, Yin Chang had given up resistance entirely. Surrounded by horsemen, he spread his arms, half-crouching as if he was about to lift something as he called at the top of his lungs, “Up we go —!”

The layer of ice under the ponies’ hooves quaked. Worried the Imperial Army had smashed a hole in the river, the Scorpions reined their horses around and nervously retreated. The instant they did, Yin Chang and the Imperial Army dropped and rolled. They sprang back out between the horses’ hooves, then picked up their blades and took to their heels.

We’ve been had!

Achi’s fury blazed, and he let loose a string of Zhou and Biansha expletives. But he didn’t give chase. He still had his wits about him, and he was certain there was another trap somewhere. Only when Yin Chang and the Imperial Army were almost out of sight did it finally hit him.

They were really fucking fleeing!

“Split up and give chase.” Achi cracked his whip in the air. “Hack off their heads!”

The Scorpions split into two flanks with Achi at the center, a sharp claw of a formation intent on trapping the Imperial Army within its grasp. The two flanks raced ahead on either side of the fleeing Imperial Army. Once they joined up, they would have the enemy completely surrounded. When Achi led the center unit to charge with their scimitars from behind, it would be a slaughterhouse.

Seven years ago, Amur had used this exact formation to ram the Duanzhou Garrison Troops into the Chashi Sinkhole. Achi, thus inspired, was especially fond of it. He’d used the same method to shred the left flank of the Libei Armored Cavalry near Duanzhou a few days ago.

The two flanks, riding hard, had already overtaken the Imperial Army, which was fleeing on foot. They turned their horses, both sides curling like serpents toward the patch of ice in front of the Imperial Army, intending to block their path.

A familiar figure stood in their way.

Battle steeds appeared around him, silent in the mist. White puffs of steam curled from their iron muzzles, their armor fearsome in the pitch-black night. The armored cavalry towered, motionless, on horseback, looming amid the raging snow and wind, their silence a wall that seemed to shut out the sounds of battle.

The men leading both flanks of the Horsemen’s formation had crossed swords with the armored cavalry before. They were not afraid, so no one called for them to stop. The ponies kicked up snowy haze as they charged

from both sides in a pincer attack, while the Scorpions at the forefront swapped their scimitars for hammers. They would knock the armored cavalry off their horses with one swing of their hammer, just as they'd done so many times before, relying on the swiftness of their horses and the strength of their arms to crush their enemy's helmets.

Xiao Chiye sat atop Snowcrest, which was pawing at the ground with its hooves. He was clad in heavy armor; no one could see what expression he wore behind the steel. He was a stabilizing force amid the chaos of this battlefield, steadying the morale of the soldiers before and behind him.

Gu Jin exhaled the instant he saw Xiao Chiye. He skidded to a stop at almost the same time as Yin Chang. The two of them turned around amid the pummeling snow to square off against Achi's pursuing soldiers.

The wind stirred up by the Biansha Horsemen swept across the river of ice. Their scimitars and hammers had hunted the men of Great Zhou from Libei to Zhongbo. No one could survive under their hooves.

Xiao Chiye hissed a breath of hot air from between thin lips.

The Scorpions on both flanks raised their hammers. But before they could bring them down, the smell of gunpowder assailed their noses. Flashes of light exploded in the snowstorm. The Scorpions, caught wholly off guard, were blown out of their saddles, while the horses collided in panic upon hearing the thunderous blast of the muskets.

Smoke poured from the brass muzzles. Xiao Chiye had only brought thirty of these weapons. They were of little use against the main forces of Biansha, but key to blowing the heads off these two flanking serpents at this moment. Their explosive power blindsided the leaders of both squads, while the Scorpions at the rear had no idea what had happened.

Xiao Chiye moved, and the Libei Armored Cavalry behind him followed suit, baring glistening new fangs. These heavily armored soldiers were like vicious wolves let out of their cages, eyes glowing green with hunger. They split into neat columns and leveled their broadswords to face the enemy.

From his position behind the Imperial Army, Achi had already seen the armored cavalry's blades. It was too late for Scorpions at the flanks to pick up their hammers again. Libei's battle steeds raised their hooves and trampled the tumbling bodies, blood spraying onto their armor.

More Scorpions surged up to take the place of their fallen comrades. Xiao Chiye shrank the Libei Armored Cavalry into a war chariot formation that barreled into the enemy. Blades bristled on all four sides, preventing the hammers from getting close. The armored cavalry resembled a battering ram as they charged through the battlefield. Xiao Chiye rode at the apex of this formation. When they joined together like this, the cavalry was an unstoppable force.

Reining in the battle steed beneath him, Achi snarled, "Swing your hammers!" Surely, as long as they had their iron hammers, the Libei Armored Cavalry would be tofu all the same.

A Scorpion's hammer whistled toward the head of a cavalryman at the fringe of the formation. It was too late to avoid the attack. An ear-splitting *clang* rang out—Haerigu had deflected the hammer with his own from atop the back of one of Libei's horses.

"Traitorous bastard!" Achi gnashed his teeth in rage. "Haerigu, you've become Libei's slave!"

With a swiftness that belied the hammer’s weight, Haerigu swung it up and knocked his opponent off his horse, then jumped to the ground as the Scorpion landed. While his opponent was still cussing in the snow, Haerigu swung his hammer down onto the man’s skull with barely a glance.

Achi’s center unit faced a dilemma. His left and right flanks were flailing aimlessly, their serpent heads hacked off by the musket fire. And with the Imperial Army blocking his way, he could no longer direct the two flanks to retreat.

It was at this point that Bayim galloped onto the scene. He knew well Achi’s importance to Duanzhou. The remaining Scorpions in Zhongbo all heeded this man; he couldn’t abandon Achi to escape on his own.

Bayim panted in the snow as he surveyed the battlefield. “Achi! Retreat! The Libei Armored Cavalry can’t catch us!”

As long as they followed the route markers westward, by daybreak at the latest, they would return to the southeast of Duanzhou, where they’d stationed a large number of troops. At that point, all that awaited Xiao Chiye would be death.

Achi tugged viciously on his horse’s reins and cracked his whip. But he didn’t refute Bayim again as he led his remaining Scorpions to fall back and away from the Imperial Army.

He knew his priorities. If he lost to Xiao Chiye here, Amur would punish him harshly. There would already be hell to pay for his rash actions tonight. His defeat here was a small matter, but if his carelessness lost them Duanzhou, then even if he survived to escape back to Gedal, Amur would have his life.

This battle didn’t count.

Achi whipped his horse hard to spur it on.

He’d merely been duped!

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Chapter 208:
Return of a Nightmare

IN PANIC, Achi fled back the way they'd come. The Scorpions loosed their saker falcons into the storm. Snowcrest pressed forward, galloping after them amid the clang of metal on metal. The thunderous hoofbeats of the Libei Armored Cavalry bearing down on them unnerved the Scorpions, who feared the ice beneath their feet would crack. No matter how fast they ran, the sound seemed to be right at their backs.

Grinding his teeth in humiliation, Achi turned into the wind to look back, but all he could see was a single set of heavy armor.

Xiao Chiye.

Bayim yanked on his reins. He knocked his horse's flank against Achi's and barked, "Retreat, retreat! Achi, stop looking at him!"

The snow fell like scattered petals, transforming the world into a pristine and sacred realm. The Biansha Horsemen charged madly with the wind at their backs for almost an hour before they managed to throw off the Libei Armored Cavalry. Even then, they didn't dare stop. When they reached their original path, Bayim called, "Pull out the route markers. Don't leave them behind for Xiao Chiye!"

They charged westward with everything they had, pulling up the markers as they went.

"We'll deploy troops to strike back at them tomorrow morning." Bayim's fur collar was pulled all the way up, his lashes dyed white by the

storm. He could barely keep his eyes open. “Xiao Chiye won’t escape the Chashi River if he loses his way in this storm.”

Achi was livid. His rage blazed so hot it scorched his chest. He had been played for a fool by Xiao Chiye even before they came face to face. No matter what, he couldn’t take this lying down.

“Listen, Achi!” Bayim chased after the lightning-swift Achi. Tugging down his fur collar, he shouted, “Don’t fall for his goading, you hear me? He’s doing it on purpose.”

“He wiped out my men!” Unable to contain himself, Achi screamed back at Bayim. “He’s taking me for a fucking ride. That son of a *bitch*!”

Three days ago, Achi had taken down Xiao Chiye’s left flank, and today, Xiao Chiye had stood there without a word and blown up Achi’s left and right flanks. The leaders of both had been elite soldiers. Achi’s heart was dripping blood. This was a warning from Xiao Chiye, a threat rubbed in his face.

“I’m going to kill him!” Achi growled. “*I’ll kill*—”

Bayim knocked Achi off his horse with a single punch. Having lost its master, the horse slowed to a stop a few paces ahead. Achi rolled in the snow, his chest heaving.

“The esuhuri knows all. If you want the Scorpions to be taken into the Twelve Tribes, then finish Xiao Chiye off tomorrow morning,” Bayim said somberly. “Lose your mind now, and you’ll be reduced to a jackal. A jackal can’t bite a wolf to death. Clear your head!”

Lying on the ground, Achi grabbed a handful of snow and wiped his face. He climbed to his feet and remounted his horse without a word.

The atmosphere among the Biansha soldiers was glum. Achi and Bayim seemed to no longer be on speaking terms, and those behind them dared not open their mouths. They galloped through the storm for another two hours, their horses huffing with exhaustion, before the route markers indicated they had reached the riverbank.

“Our falcons will notify the reinforcements.” Achi slowed his horse to a trot and guided it onto the bank. “We can wait here.”

Bayim was still uneasy. He was a man who kept to himself, and thus took particular notice of his environment. The endless snow obstructed the world from view; he couldn’t see anything more than a few steps from where they stood. Even so, he could keenly sense that this was not the southeastern side of Duanzhou whence they came.

“We went the wrong way,” Bayim muttered, squinting into the gale. Between sheets of blowing snow, he caught an indistinct glimpse of what lay ahead. “This place is—”

A horse at the rear that had yet to step ashore suddenly lost its footing, its hind legs sliding into a hole in the ice. The Scorpion on its back yanked uselessly at the reins amid the blinding snowstorm. In its panic, the horse broke its hind knees against the edge of the ice and screamed as its entire body crashed into the water.

The unit was promptly thrown into disarray. The ponies spooked, and the Scorpions berated them to no avail. Fearing they would slide in too, they thrashed at the ponies’ flanks with their whips. Achi heard the clank of heavy armor amid the chaos. At first he thought he’d misheard—but soon enough, the dark silhouettes of the armored cavalry loomed out of the snow.

No matter how battle-addled Achi was, he'd caught on by now. Spurring his horse, he shouted, "Mount your horses! *Run!*"

The route markers were genuine enough, but Xiao Chiye had long shifted them away from their original locations. The footprints had indeed been a ruse—but Xiao Chiye's true intent had been to lead them here.

Seeing Bayim hadn't moved, Achi shoved into him and cursed, "On your horse! Snap the fuck out of it!"

Holding utterly still, Bayim glanced at Achi from the corner of his eye. Finally sensing something amiss, Achi looked up. The color drained from his face.

The stretch of darkness ahead of them was none other than the Chashi Sinkhole.

Achi wiped sweat from his temples and peered through the snow, only to see that the Libei Armored Cavalry had already silently flanked them. He turned back and spied Xiao Chiye.

Seven years ago, the Biansha Horsemen had slaughtered thirty thousand men from the Duanzhou Garrison Troops here. Now, seven years later, on a stormy night much like that one, Xiao Chiye had used the same battle formation to herd them toward the Chashi Sinkhole. Achi had never met Xiao Chiye off the battlefield, but in this instant, he thought he understood the man's intent.

Bayim's throat bobbed. Clutching his leather-bound book, he muttered the words Hassen had once spoken: "Returning the favor, an eye for an eye."

Xiao Chiye was the toughest wolf to deal with. By now, Bayim understood he would have bitten Hassen to death to retrieve Xiao Fangxu's

head. An opponent like this remembered the source of each and every scar. He would make his own chances and tear madly into his foes with his fangs. His enemies would never escape unscathed.

“Reinforcements are on their way.” Achi was surprisingly calm. He watched Xiao Chiye without blinking. “Hold the line until they arrive, and this battle will still be ours to win.”

Achi couldn’t see Xiao Chiye’s face, but even through that helmet, he sensed his derision. Achi didn’t believe in the Biansha gods; his own tattoo was his only totem. He was a Scorpion surviving between the cracks. He wouldn’t concede defeat until the moment his head left his body.

But Xiao Chiye also believed in his tattoo. It represented his father, and his Libei. The scar Hassen had left on his shoulder had never stopped burning. He had suppressed his sorrow and fury too long, so long he could hear Wolfsfang howling in its sheath.

Under the snowy dome of the sky, the violent gale rode roughshod over the snowbanks, tearing them into flakes like catkins flying in the wind. In the moment before white blotted out his vision, Achi saw the armored cavalry charge. Their armored figures were like swords covered in dust. But in the next moment, as they crashed toward the Biansha Horsemen like a mountainous wave, that armor seemed to have shaken off all of its disguise; all that remained were sharp edges, glinting coldly in the night, their brilliance finally unmasked.

The instant the first iron hammer swung down, Xiao Chiye parried with Wolfsfang. Snowcrest didn’t even slow. The armored cavalry crashed head-on into the Biansha Horsemen, blade screeching against blade.

Snowcrest, clad in heavy armor, tossed its head and knocked aside a pony standing in its way.

The Biansha Horsemen were like a waterskin crushed until it burst. Under Xiao Chiye's heavy onslaught, their resistance crumbled within the blink of an eye as the war chariot formation rammed them backward. The sinkhole lay just behind them; if they retreated another step, they would plunge into its depths.

Achi lifted the iron hammer that weighed a hundred catties. Within this short clash, he had come to realize that Xiao Chiye was the most vital part of the Libei Armored Cavalry. He knocked a cavalryman off his mount with a swing of his hammer and heard the man's head slam into the snow with a *thud*. His horse sidestepped over the body, and a second later, his hammer was streaking toward Xiao Chiye's face.

It passed through empty air.

Achi had thought Xiao Chiye would press his victory, but he did not. He fell back toward the rest of the Libei Armored Cavalry, and the war chariot formation underwent a transformation.

Bayim, hovering at the back with his book in his arms, had a clear view as the cavalry reformed.

Was this really the Libei Armored Cavalry? It was clearly a heavy-duty war chariot!

Xiao Chiye was unwilling to give up Xiao Fangxu's heavy armor; he didn't want to prove his old man wrong. After speaking to Lu Guangbai, Qi Zhuyin, and Yin Chang, he'd devised an entirely new approach to cavalry battles. He retained the heavy weight but cast away the long broadswords of the former Libei Armored Cavalry. This Libei Armored Cavalry was

equipped with new blades. They were single-edged sabers like before, but their blades were so long there was no way for the iron hammers to get close. He had observed Lu Guangbai's infantrymen on the battlefield: What they lacked in speed, they made up for with the solidity of their war chariot formation. Xiao Chiye had eliminated any need to chase those swift ponies; he wanted the Biansha Horsemen to come to them.

That battle Qi Zhuyin had fought in Libei was skillful in its swap between light and heavy cavalry. Xiao Chiye thus paired the Libei Armored Cavalry with the Imperial Army. When they appeared on the same battlefield, their strategies would be erratic and unpredictable. Even the adaptable Hassen would no longer reign supreme in the wilderness.

But the last and the most crucial influence was Yin Chang's dagger squad.

Yin Chang had modified Lu Guangbai's war chariot formation by splitting the soldiers into narrow, dagger-like columns for quick attacks. Haerigu had learned this move on the sly and thus given Xiao Chiye yet another source of inspiration at the Beiyuan Training Grounds. He incorporated the daggers into his war chariot. This was the current Libei Armored Cavalry, a force of formidable and shocking might.

Very quickly, Achi came to understand that their iron hammers were useless. They could not avoid the long blades to get within swinging distance of the Libei Armored Cavalry. But when he swapped the iron hammers for scimitars, the Libei Armored Cavalry would strike out in sharp columns like bayonets springing from a box, piercing the Scorpions until their formations were in tatters. These shining blades extended and retracted at will.

This approach was like a heavy-duty war chariot that had discarded the cumbersome wooden structure of common siege weapons and been completely reforged in iron and steel—it was faster, more responsive. If Xiao Chiye commanded it, they could even dismantle their formation on the spot and break out into field squads to lay ambushes.

Although this nascent force was still rough around the edges, it was undoubtedly a Libei Armored Cavalry that belonged to Xiao Chiye alone.

Achi saw defeat looming before his eyes—but then he heard a falcon's cries from within the storm. His saker falcon folded its wings and dove down from the heavens, heralding the reinforcements he had long been waiting for.

"Why are there so many of them?" Yin Chang had been about to sit on the ground to pour the bloody water from his boots when he saw riders swarming like ants from the southwest. He clambered to his feet and stomped back into his boots. "We're doomed! Those're almost three times our fucking numbers!"

The Scorpions' morale instantly soared. The sounds of killing crashed over them in waves as the two armies engaged in a battle of life and death before the Chashi Sinkhole. Blood glittered where it splashed over the snow. The Libei Armored Cavalry and Imperial Army were giving everything they had. This was their only chance to break out of the Biansha troops' encirclement. If they missed the opportunity tonight, they were as good as dead.

Gu Jin lifted Haerigu by the back of his collar and kicked him into the melee. Seeing Yin Chang limping, he brandished his blade to ward off the Biansha soldiers and shouted to the old man, "Elder Yin, are you hurt?!"

Yin Chang wrinkled his red nose and fidgeted in discomfort. “M-my foot’s itching from the damp.”

Haerigu nimbly dodged scimitars. Every now and then, he had to flash his little golden token to the Imperial Army, who had gone mad with bloodlust, and shout, “We’re on the same side!”

On the other end of the battlefield, Achi, far more adept with the scimitar than the hammer, had locked blades with Xiao Chiye. The ground shook under the pounding of boots and hooves. No one saw who fell from their horse first, but within moments, the entire edge of the sinkhole crumbled away, sending men and horses tumbling into the muck.

The Imperial Army spat out mouthfuls of sludge and popped their heads up over the dense mass of enemies, shouting at each other. “Fuck! Did Er-ye fall down there too?!”

Snowcrest was knee-deep in mud at the bottom of the pit. Achi scrambled up onto a rock and sprang toward them. Unable to find his footing in time, Xiao Chiye lifted one leg to kick Achi in the chest. As Achi reeled back, Xiao Chiye was already on his feet. The hammer came swinging for his face, and Xiao Chiye dodged, bringing up his armguard to ward off the blow.

Crack!

Frostfall smashed through an old wooden fence as Shen Zechuan galloped through the blizzard, his cloak snapping in the wind. Flakes of ice danced before his eyes, accentuating the sharp, forbidding harshness of his gaze.

Fei Sheng, aware that they were entering the battlefield, rode only a few lengths behind Shen Zechuan's horse with the Embroidered Uniform Guard. Tantai Hu didn't dare let Shen Zechuan take the lead on his own. He led his own troops after the prefectural governor with such haste he was practically standing on his saddle. He shouted at Shen Zechuan through the gale, "Your Lordship! The northeast—the Chashi Sinkhole!"

Plumes of snow flew from under his horse's hooves. Shen Zechuan's reins were soaked with sweat from his grip. He hadn't made a single stop along the way; Frostfall was already flagging under him.

The Chashi Sinkhole!

The world Shen Zechuan had passed on his way was a boundless expanse of white wilderness. But the moment he entered the vicinity of the Chashi Sinkhole, his nightmare surged to the surface like a tidal wave, and the familiar stench of blood choked his nose and throat. Shen Zechuan gasped for air, unable to spot Xiao Chiye in the chaos.

Shen Zechuan let out a fierce cry: "Xiao Ce'an—!"

Looking around, Fei Sheng spotted Yin Chang, who in turn caught sight of the prefectural governor clad in bloodless white, conspicuous in the darkness. He jumped up and down, waving his blade. "The sinkhole, in the sinkhole, Er-ye's in the sinkhole!"

Shen Zechuan's face drained ghastly white. Limbs ice-cold, he half rolled off the horse; even his hands were trembling as he gripped Avalanche. Blood seeped up the hem of his white robe, staining it crimson as he stepped over corpses. His vision was filled with the sinkhole that had appeared in his nightmares a million times.

He had no eyes for anything else. Heavy snow veiled the sky. He stumbled to the edge of the sinkhole and slid down, voice trembling as he shouted, “Xiao Ce’an!”

Nightmare and reality overlapped. Shen Zechuan had seen his own body strewn among the corpses, but even in his nightmares, Xiao Chiye had never been among the bodies lying here.

Fei Sheng had never seen the prefectural governor in such a state. He hurried over to help him up, but Shen Zechuan pushed him aside. Wading through that sea of blood, he pulled up the corpses piled around Snowcrest one by one, dragging them away so desperately his hands grew slippery with blood. One of these limp bodies suddenly raised a hand and grasped Shen Zechuan’s wrist.

“Lanzhou.” Xiao Chiye’s voice was muffled inside the helmet. “Lan __”

Shen Zechuan had already shoved the helmet off him. In that swirling snow, he got a clear look at Xiao Chiye’s face. With no regard for the filth, he wrapped his arms tightly around Xiao Chiye’s head.

Xiao Chiye reached up and stroked Shen Zechuan’s back. He wanted to speak, but amid the soughing of the wind, he only heard Shen Zechuan cry softly over and over. “Xiao Chiye… Xiao Chiye…”

Xiao Chiye felt his heart shatter into pieces.

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Chapter 209:
Embrace

SHEN ZECHUAN'S nights were filled with the Chashi Sinkhole.

When he'd first entered the Temple of Guilt, the interior had been old and dilapidated, the walls set with broken windows that couldn't keep out the chilly wind. Ji Gang had saved the only sheltered corner for him, and still he would lie with his head pillowed on his arms, not daring to tell his shifu he couldn't sleep.

Back then, Shen Zechuan could still remember Ji Mu's face. There were shadows of Hua Pingting in his older brother, a handsome man with features as elegant as his mother's. The traffic from neighbors clamoring to play matchmaker for him while he still lived at home was enough to wear down the steps outside their house.

"All I've been thinking about these days is my promotion." In Shen Zechuan's memory, Ji Mu squatted in the courtyard, eating dumplings from a bowl in his hand. "We can move to the east side once I'm promoted."

Imitating him, Shen Zechuan stuffed himself until his cheeks were bulging. He nodded and said around a mouthful of dumplings, "I'll watch over Sister-in-Law for you."

There was a girl. She and Ji Mu had known each other since they were children; she had originally lived next door to them, then later moved to the eastern side of the city. The girl's father was a social climber, always thinking of marrying his daughter off to someone in the local government. Ji Mu had

joined the garrison to prove himself worthy, working day and night at his official duties, hoping to wed the maiden before she was married off.

Ji Gang didn't earn much; their family was not well-off. With two sons to raise, Hua Pingting saved her own dowry as funds for the boys' future weddings. Once Ji Mu came of age, she and Ji Gang started calculating the cost of engaging a matchmaker.

Winter in Duanzhou was vast and empty. The Chashi River lay to the east. When the boys were just a little younger, they had gone onto the ice in winter to pull sleds. Shen Zechuan had always been a clever child. He coaxed the little rascals who tagged along to play the horses while he played the lord sitting on the sled, directing them to drag him all over the place.

"My little brother will surely go far in life"—this was something Ji Mu told their father often.

Hua Pingting treated Shen Zechuan as her own blood son, and so Ji Mu treated Shen Zechuan as his own little brother. When Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming were growing up in Libei, riding horses and drawing bows, Shen Zechuan was tramping with Ji Mu all over the mountains and plains. Shen Zechuan was sloppy in his training with Ji-Style Boxing until he was fifteen, but Ji Mu always covered for him; he refused to let Hua Pingting admonish the boy.

In the third year of the reign of Xiande, Ji Mu was promoted to squad commander. The entire family was overjoyed. Hua Pingting started making arrangements, counting the family's savings over and over as she and Ji Gang prepared to hire a matchmaker to propose marriage to the maiden on the east side of the city.

That night, Ji Mu had the evening rotation. Shen Zechuan took the food Hua Pingting packed and ran over to the garrison to deliver a meal to his brother. It was the last time Shen Zechuan saw Hua Pingting. His shiniang stopped him at the entrance of the courtyard and buttoned up his padded jacket for him. She fastened his fur collar, bundling him up securely. He'd left to the familiar refrain of her instructions: "Hurry there and back."

Ji Mu secretly gave Shen Zechuan some wine, and Shen Zechuan drank it by dipping his chopsticks in and sucking on them, looking very much like a plump little radish wrapped in his thick jacket among a row of strapping soldiers. The snow fell, and those rugged men said it was an auspicious omen—Duanzhou would have a bountiful harvest next year.

Ji Mu rapped his chopsticks on the porcelain bowl and sang the tune "A Song for Peaceful and Tranquil Times."[2] He was only twenty that year, and about to bring home a pretty wife; he and his brother got along harmoniously, and their parents were free from illness and worry. These should have been the best days of his life.

Whenever Shen Zechuan thought back to that night, tears streamed down his cheeks. He had lost the courage to reminisce since his days in the Temple of Guilt; he no longer dreamed of those times. Ji Mu was a grotesque skeleton in the nightmares that had plagued him for the past seven years. He had long forgotten what his elder brother looked like; he couldn't even remember their last conversation.

Why didn't he pull Ji Mu up?

In so many dreams, Shen Zechuan had crawled his way out of the sinkhole, then fallen back in again. For the first few years, he would sink into the pit and burst out sobbing. But at some point since then, Shen Zechuan had

left himself behind in the pit. Now when his dreams took him here, he stood silently and watched as the snow buried him.

Army boots trod upon the snow, creaking as they drew near.

Face blank, Shen Zechuan looked over his shoulder and saw a travel-worn Ji Mu. Tonight, he was clean and uninjured. Resting a hand on the hilt of his saber, he closed the distance between them.

Ji Mu hadn't changed at all after seven years. His cheeks were pink from the cold, and as he walked, he cupped his hands and huffed warm air into them. All the hostility of their struggle in the sea of blood had vanished without a trace. Shen Zechuan looked at him and remembered him singing "Song for Peaceful and Tranquil Times" the day he departed.

He was now as tall as Ji Mu. He called out wearily, "Ge."

Ji Mu came to a stop before Shen Zechuan. The wind tousled the hair around his face. "Why aren't you going home?"

"There's too much snow," Shen Zechuan answered. "I lost my way."

Ji Mu laughed. "Silly kid. Mama's looking for you."

Shen Zechuan looked back and saw Hua Pingting standing not far off. His shiniang carried a lantern in the heavy snow, the hem of her skirt rippling in the wind. As he watched her, the tears coursed down his face.

He remembered everything. That was why he wanted to forget it all.

Hand steady on the hilt of his blade, Ji Mu passed through Shen Zechuan and walked toward Hua Pingting.

Unable to stop himself, Shen Zechuan shouted, "Ge!"

He made a desperate attempt to grab Ji Mu, but his brother didn't turn back. Shen Zechuan chased after him. With every step he took, the blood

under his feet rose an inch. He broke into a run, but he couldn't break free of the bonds that held him back. He fell into the pool of blood, limbs tangled in the corpses. He shouted himself hoarse as Ji Mu walked farther away: "*Come back!*"

Ji Mu was about to vanish into the snow.

Shen Zechuan's fingers scrabbled without purchase as the blood rose up and swallowed him within the sinkhole. The terror of drowning gripped him. He couldn't breathe. All he could do was struggle and look on helplessly as that faint light slowly died out.

"Shen Lanzhou!"

Xiao Chiye gathered him into his arms. His broad shoulders could withstand the very worst of the storm. He brought with him the light of the blazing sun; he was the bracing gale that swept this dark, gloomy landscape clean and dispelled the tempest. This close, the scorching heat of him filled the world, burning Shen Zechuan and leaving no room for anything else.

Shen Zechuan jolted awake, his clothes drenched with sweat. Xiao Chiye cupped his cheeks and touched the tips of their noses together in the darkness. He kissed him softly, as if to soothe him. Still gasping for breath, Shen Zechuan wrapped his arms around Xiao Chiye's neck, blinking tears from his eyes as they clung to each other.

"Come back, Lanzhou." Xiao Chiye leaned in closer to coax him. "Come back to me."

Heart still pounding, Shen Zechuan nodded. He touched their foreheads together, his eyes wide with panic as he gazed at Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye swiped his thumbs across the corner of his eyes and caressed his cheeks.

“Everything’s fine now.” Xiao Chiye gave him another soft kiss, and then another. “Just hug me tight.” They were in a military tent. The weak fire in the charcoal brazier had gone cold in the middle of the night. The two of them shared a simple plank bed padded with a thin mattress; a cloak was their only blanket. Fearing Lanzhou would fall sick, Xiao Chiye grabbed his icy hands and stuffed them into his own outer robes, pressing them flat against his chest.

Shen Zechuan’s breathing evened as he grasped at the material of Xiao Chiye’s inner robe until it wrinkled. Not once did Xiao Chiye’s arms loosen around him. They huddled together beneath the cloak as he whispered to Shen Zechuan. “Are you cold?”

Shen Zechuan buried his face in Xiao Chiye’s neck and murmured, “Yeah.”

Xiao Chiye held him tighter, tucking the crown of Shen Zechuan’s head under his chin. Eyes half-lidded, he said, “Come a little closer; you won’t be cold anymore.”

They clung to each other for warmth, like a pair of cubs curled around each other for survival. Shen Zechuan felt his way around to Xiao Chiye’s back, his icy-cold touch making Xiao Chiye suck a breath through his teeth. Shen Zechuan’s mind only calmed once his fingers reached the wolf on Xiao Chiye’s back. He caressed it carefully, as though stroking soft fur.

Xiao Chiye’s back was taut with muscles. Shen Zechuan’s touch tickled, but there was nowhere for him to move on the narrow bed. He had no choice but to tilt his head back and endure the waves of tingling numbness rippling down his spine. When he could no longer bear it, he took hold of Shen Zechuan’s wrist and turned over to pin him down beneath him. He

pressed up against Shen Zechuan and held his body there, breathing faster than before.

Shen Zechuan sulked. “Didn’t you want me to hug you?”

“Is that what you call hugging?” Xiao Chiye pressed closer, then repeated his question, his voice gone low. “You call that hugging?” His voice sounded like it had escaped from the deepest part of his chest. Shen Zechuan looked up archly, as if struck silent by indignation.

Releasing Shen Zechuan’s wrist, Xiao Chiye slid his hand along his waist, his ticklish touch turning Shen Zechuan’s face red. At first he held strong, but when Xiao Chiye pressed his chest against him, firm and hot, his expressive eyes gradually misted over again. Between gasps for breath, he tipped his head back and laughed.

Xiao Chiye loved Lanzhou’s laugh to the moon and back—when those half-closed eyes rippled with emotion, his reflection drowned in them.

Shen Zechuan laughed until his neck ran with sweat and his clothes were stuck to his back. He was exhausted when he calmed his breathing enough to welcome Xiao Chiye’s kiss. The warmth under the cloak made Shen Zechuan forget all about the snowstorm.

Xiao Chiye knew Lanzhou often didn’t sleep well, but tonight, he was here.

He would make sure that, from now on, Lanzhou only ever dreamed of him.

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Chapter 210:
Qingshu Tribe

THE SNOWSTORM was still raging at dawn the next day. The charcoal braziers in the military tents had gone cold. All the generals gathered in the main tent by candlelight, standing around a map on a table and waiting for Xiao Chiye to speak.

The battle at the Chashi Sinkhole hadn't been a particularly tough fight, but the circumstances had been perilous. Xiao Chiye had taken advantage of the snowstorm and led Achi north to the sinkhole, where fewer Biansha troops were stationed. Achi's reinforcements had only come so quickly because they still had a relay station nearby. But since he had shifted the bulk of his forces to the southeast and taken a beating at the hands of Xiao Chiye's Libei Armored Cavalry, he'd given Tantai Hu, who was watching for any movement in Duanzhou like a hawk, the opportunity to swoop in with his timely support.

Xiao Chiye had merely removed his armor last night before lying down. Once the medic withdrew from the tent, Xiao Chiye rotated his shoulders and looked around at the others. "We're not here to win one battle, but to wrest Duanzhou from them. Achi is dead, and the majority of his troops are still stationed in the southeast. There are less than ten thousand left within the city walls. It's an opportunity we can't afford to miss."

Fei Sheng stole a few glances at his master as he brought his daily medicine. He noted the governor to be in decent spirits.

“A fair few of their soldiers escaped yesterday.” Yin Chang leaned over the map and put a finger on the southeast of Duanzhou. “Once the troops camped here receive the news, they’ll guess we’ll attack the city again next. They will move to intercept us.”

The old man’s unkempt beard was haphazardly tied. While he feared no one when it came to discussing strategy, he didn’t dare drink in the presence of Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye, relying on cups of strong tea to satisfy his cravings.

Xiao Chiye didn’t immediately reply; instead, he left the floor open for Tantai Hu to speak.

In the past two years, Tantai Hu had come to acquire some insights of his own. He pondered the second master’s silence, then raised a finger to tap the city of Duanzhou. “We’re at the Chashi Sinkhole, some distance away from the city walls. If the Biansha troops in the southeast ride north to intercept us, the military strength in Duanzhou proper will remain unchanged.” He shot an apprehensive glance at Xiao Chiye. When he saw that Xiao Chiye’s expression remained unchanged, he went on. “Once that happens, Wu Ziyu, currently stationed on Mount Luo, can go around to the west side of Duanzhou. We can launch a surprise attack from that direction.”

Xiao Chiye nodded approvingly.

“Sure, we can make ourselves bait and lure their main forces to the Chashi Sinkhole,” Gu Jin cut in, his expression somber. “But Master, the Chashi River will be right at our backs. The moment Amur seizes the opportunity to launch a sneak attack across the river or Hassen gets sent south, we’ll be under attack from two sides. If Wu Ziyu’s men are on the west side of Duanzhou then, we’ll be left without reinforcements.”

“Without reinforcements? The hearts of our soldiers fighting on the northern front would break if they heard you.” Even as he spoke, Xiao Chiye kept one watchful eye on Shen Zechuan drinking his medicine. “Is Third Sand Camp not reinforcement?”

Gu Jin paused, then shook his head. “I don’t trust Guo Weili.”

Xiao Chiye did not dwell on this topic. He patted Gu Jin lightly on the back. “Dage has a clear view of the situation from where he sits in the homeland. We *must* take Duanzhou at all costs. Lu Guangbai and Shifu are still fighting on the northern front. All three camps will do their utmost to stall Hassen. As for Amur…” Xiao Chiye’s smile was sharp. “The only tribe he can deploy quickly enough is the Qingshu tribe.”

Qi Zhuyin’s request to go on the offensive against the Qingshu tribe had been denied by both the empress dowager and the Ministry of War, but that didn’t mean she was totally helpless.

“Qidong’s military provisions are being supplied by the Yan Clan; the carriages set out for Cejun Commandery three days ago.” Shen Zechuan spoke through the lingering bitterness of the medicine. “Grand Marshal Qi should have eaten her fill by now.”

As long as Qi Zhuyin could fill her stomach, she could keep playing the long game with Qudu. She hadn’t ventured into the capital to contend with those wily old foxes for several years now—it was more trouble than it was worth. But now that the scimitars were flashing right before her eyes, her priorities had changed.

“The Biansha Horsemen can’t move as swiftly in the snow—we still have some time to prepare,” Xiao Chiye said. “Our encampment now is rudimentary. Have the Dunzhou Garrison Troops dig trenches around the

perimeter tonight. Take shifts for night patrol, and don't forget to send falcons out for reconnaissance. The Imperial Army and Libei Armored Cavalry have been fighting hard for several days, so make sure to rest whenever possible. We have to conserve our strength if we're to stall the enemy long enough to give Wu Ziyu a chance to get to Duanzhou."

With the heavy snow obstructing the roads, any message delivered via horseback would reach Mount Luo too late. Fortunately, the Libei Armored Cavalry had brought along their falcons, which could deliver a message to Mount Luo in the northwest within hours.

Everyone voiced their agreement. Once they started to discuss logistics among themselves, Xiao Chiye reached into his lapels. Shen Zechuan had just set down the medicine bowl and grasped the folding fan in his sleeve when something dropped into the cradle of his arms. He stared—it was a piece of candy wrapped in oilpaper.

Xiao Chiye continued looking at the map with a perfectly straight face, as if he'd had nothing to do with it at all.

On Mount Luo, Wu Ziyu was awakened by his deputy general at midnight. He opened the letter the falcon had brought and read it by candlelight in his tent. Instantly, he was wide awake. Not daring to rest a moment longer, he rose to put on his armor. "Where's Yan Heru?"

The question was hardly out of his mouth when Yan Heru popped his head out from behind the tent flap. "Here I am!"

Wu Ziyu clutched the letter and said gruffly, "Are the men dead? We're just letting him enter as he wishes?"

“Hey, come on now, don’t be mad.” Yan Heru ducked under the flap, cradling his little golden abacus against his chest. “The governor told me to wait here, so I’m waiting, yes? What else am I supposed to do? Master Wu, aren’t you being way too cautious?”

“This is an army, not a merchant caravan. If anything goes wrong, we might just lose our heads.” Wu Ziyu had dealt with the Mount Luo bandits when he’d prepared military provisions for the Libei Armored Cavalry the year before; he wasn’t flustered speaking with someone like Yan Heru. He folded the letter. “We’re moving out soon. The Mount Luo bandits have just been eradicated, and my lords aren’t comfortable leaving you here alone. Now, hurry and pack. You’ll march with me.”

They all knew Yan Heru had no qualms doing business with the Biansha people in the past. If they were to leave him on Mount Luo, there would be no one to keep an eye on him. Wu Ziyu didn’t like that. This man had to be carefully watched.

Yan Heru’s face went a shade paler with fright. Still hugging his abacus, he trailed behind Wu Ziyu. “Swords and sabers have no eyes, Master Wu—they don’t look out for innocents! Why take *me*? My family’s businesses depend on me; I can’t go dying on the battlefield. You know how much Qidong needs military provisions, right? Well, I’m the one in charge of their delivery now. So I’ll just stay behind. Or—oh, you can even assign someone to escort me back to Cizhou! Dunzhou is fine too!”

“You seem to think these soldiers here aren’t capable of protecting you.” Wu Ziyu grinned menacingly, baring his teeth. “I’ll take you back right after the battle. You can return with our governor. I assure you, this won’t hold up your affairs.”

Without waiting for Yan Heru's reply, he called for a guard to stuff the young man into the carriage to be shipped out with the troops.

Wu Ziyu exhaled deeply at the entrance of the tent. It was still dark. He took out the letter he'd folded up earlier and read through it again. The candlelight from the tent silhouetted his figure in the doorway; for a long time, he stared blankly at the phrase *surprise attack*.

If the attack they were proposing on Duanzhou failed, Xiao Chiye's safety would be at risk. This battle had to be fought not only quickly, but with a steady hand. The two men inextricably linked to the outcome of this war were both at the Chashi Sinkhole at the moment. Wu Ziyu couldn't afford to take responsibility for the loss of either of them. He felt a massive weight come down on his shoulders, and he *had* to shoulder it.

But I'm just the supply squadron…

A deep crease formed between Wu Ziyu's brows as he frowned. He gazed out into the night and recalled the first time he'd met Xiao Chiye. Under the blazing sun, Xiao Chiye had turned his head back to look at him, his eyes deep and quiet.

Aren't you the Libei Armored Cavalry?

To this day, Wu Ziyu still hadn't dared answer that question. He appeared to have quietly accepted his lot as an escort for the supply wagons, but at the same time, he was loath to submit to this fate. When he was younger, Xiao Jiming had sent him to Border Camp as punishment for drinking on the job. He had watched Zhao Hui become the commanding general of the Three Great Battalions of Liuyang, and now he was watching again as Chen Yang and Gu Jin were each successively entrusted with heavier

and heavier responsibilities. Meanwhile, Xiao Chiye held him back in Border Camp, never once deploying him on the front lines.

Wu Ziyu spat into the dirt and stuffed the letter back into his lapels. He took a few steps forward in the snow before suddenly leaping up and pumping his clenched fists in the air.

If Xiao Chiye was willing to give him this chance, he would stake his life and all he held dear to fight this battle for him.

By early evening the next day, the snowfall had begun to lighten.

Xiao Chiye stood in the tent and strapped on his heavy armor. Several of the plates had taken damage from the assaults of the iron hammers a few days before. Those on his arms were the most severely battered—the left side, which had taken the brunt of Achi's blows, was visibly dented.

"Wu Ziyu has arrived on the western side of Duanzhou. Get through tonight, and we can execute a surprise attack from both sides tomorrow morning." Xiao Chiye appeared even taller in armor, blocking practically all the light from the candle.

Shen Zechuan sat on the plank bed watching him. In the eyes of others, his presence here had a deeper meaning. Xiao Jiming's willingness to put everything on the line and let all three of Libei's camps assist Zhongbo in this battle was not only because Xiao Chiye was here. It was also because Shen Zechuan was here—his presence itself was a show of his sincerity.

"Fei Sheng and the Embroidered Uniform Guard will follow Haerigu. They can take the place of the scouts we're lacking." Shen Zechuan looked

on as Xiao Chiye fastened the armguard. “If you don’t come back tomorrow, I’ll send the remaining troops to the front line in Duanzhou.”

The troops Xiao Chiye was leaving behind here were meant to serve as a protective barrier for Shen Zechuan. If something unexpected were to happen, these men had been instructed to escort him north, where soldiers stationed at Third Sand Camp would ride out to receive him.

Xiao Chiye’s hand stilled; he looked up from his armguard as understanding dawned. Shen Zechuan motioned for Xiao Chiye to crouch down. He could hardly squat in his armor, so he stepped back and went down on one knee before Lanzhou.

Snow drifted like willow catkins through the sky; over the breeze came the sound of Fei Sheng lecturing Yin Chang about his drinking. Outside, the Libei Armored Cavalry trudged through the snow in their heavy armor, moving like a well-oiled machine. It was noisy all around, but inside the tent, the coal burned quietly in the brazier, and the pot of tea hanging above it pinged lightly as it came to a boil.

Xiao Chiye’s gaze was penetrating. Of late, his sharp edges were becoming harder and harder to conceal. “Wait for me here.”

“I’d love to go, of course.” Shen Zechuan’s cloak slipped off his shoulders. Mimicking Xiao Chiye’s favorite gesture, he took Xiao Chiye’s chin between his fingers and cocked his head. “But I’m no soldier. I’ve married a poor man in a long winter; all your wife can do is stay behind and wait for better times.”

Xiao Chiye, who had been letting Shen Zechuan manhandle him as he wished, burst out laughing at these words.

Shen Zechuan could hear the shuffle of Gu Jin's boots outside the tent. He took the helmet and secured it on Xiao Chiye's head. Meeting Xiao Chiye's eyes, he exchanged a kiss with him through the cold steel.

Xiao Chiye's icy iron fingers caressed Shen Zechuan's cheeks. "After tonight," he said, his voice low and deep, "my Lanzhou will rule over Zhongbo."

He had tested his new sabers on Achi, but it was far from enough. His appetite was large enough to devour both the northern and southern battlefields. Every battle was a trial. He wanted to hone his blade even faster.

The Biansha main force in the southeast numbered twenty-five thousand, of which only five thousand were Scorpions. The remaining troops lacked horses, so many of them were temporarily acting as infantrymen. They'd lost their commanding general, Achi, and they were unable to request new orders from their leaders across the Chashi River. Obstructing Xiao Chiye was their last option to defend Duanzhou.

This was what Xiao Chiye wanted—he needed them to have no choice but to face him. Once these twenty-five thousand men moved to meet him, the western side of Duanzhou would be wide open, and Wu Ziyu could begin his attack on the city. The advantage in Shen Zechuan sealing off Zhongbo was now apparent: Duanzhou would get no assistance from any direction. And since all their provisions had gone to feed Achi's twenty thousand men on the move, the eight thousand troops guarding the city would meet the enemy's attack on empty stomachs.

While the battle in Zhongbo was just beginning, the Bianjun Commandery was deep in its nightly rhythms.

News of Achi’s defeat had yet to reach the Qingshu tribe, whose night patrol squad was presently roaming just outside the border of the Bianjun Commandery. The commanding general of the Qingshu tribe was a man called Sumong, who’d been Hassen’s deputy general when Hassen was in the south. He had crossed swords with Lu Guangbai here and been permitted to partake in official strategy meetings in Amur’s own tent. But because his tribe was weak, he hadn’t been permitted to follow Hassen up north.

For once it wasn’t snowing in Bianjun Commandery tonight. From afar, Suotian Pass looked like a sleeping beauty reclining on her couch, with her head pillowed upon the city. Tufts of snow floated through the air, and no trace of the moon could be found behind the clouds.

In fact, it was a little too quiet. Sumong felt ill at ease; he increased the number of soldiers on night patrol, instructing his men to keep all eyes on the border of Bianjun Commandery in case of a surprise attack from the garrison troops.

During the latter half of the night, the patrol squad lit a campfire in the wilderness. They filled their stomachs with melted snow and roasted the dried meat jerky they carried with them.

“The Scorpions in the north have been winning battles,” one man said in the Biansha tongue, breaking off pieces of jerky. “Soon enough they’ll be able to join the Twelve Tribes. When that happens, will we still receive provisions down here in the south?”

Sipping on melted snow, Sumong shook his head. “The esuhuri will never allow the Scorpions to become a true tribe. They are servants of the Liaoying tribe.”

The Scorpions' mothers were all natives of the Zhou empire. And now, thanks to the emergence of traitors like Haerigu, it would be difficult to convince the Biansha masses to accept the Scorpions as their own even if they were victorious in battle. Moreover, in the desert, all tribes already answered to Hassen.

"If they give us Gedal," the man said, smiling at Sumong, "then we'll never have to worry about starving again."

Sumong gulped more melted snow and didn't answer immediately. He'd attempted to sound Amur out on this topic before but gotten nowhere. The Qingshu tribe was not a powerful one. The Liaoying tribe of today was no longer the minor power it had been in the past, and the Huiyan tribe had thrown in their lot with Libei, leaving the Qingshu tribe here to choke on sand with the troops of the Bianjun Garrison. Who would have expected that even their adversary would take off in the end? Sumong had been stationed here day in and day out for years now, but he could not see a future. He had pinned all his hopes on his young son, but as it happened, his son had passed at the beginning of spring this year, as little ones tended to do.

"We aren't waiting here for nothing." These were the only words of comfort Sumong could offer. "At least we won't face Libei's wrath if we stay here."

The men all burst into laughter.

The campfire crackled. Several feral dogs slunk up behind one of the soldiers, who brandished a withered branch and hissed to drive them away. But the dogs were starving; they drooled and huffed as they circled the men.

"Drive them off," Sumong ordered.

The man stood up, grabbed his scimitar, and stomped his feet. The dogs cowered back, and the soldier, his belly bulging, turned back to Sumong. “We can hunt them. Dog-hide is—”

Before he could finish, the dogs lunged for him as if mad. Teeth bared and snarling, they dragged him to the ground and latched onto his arm so fiercely he dropped the scimitar. The leather of his armor couldn’t keep out their sharp fangs, and he howled with pain.

Sumong shot to his feet. The horsemen on night patrol ran to the screaming soldier and kicked the feral dogs away, then dragged the man back toward the fire. The eyes of these dogs gleamed strangely red. Sumong wasn’t taking any chances—he ordered his men to draw their bows and shoot. “Something’s wrong with these dogs!”

The faint cries of a partridge reverberated through the night. Seeming to sense danger, the dogs turned tail and fled just as the soldiers got on their horses and nocked their arrows. The animals scrambled westward in a panic with the horsemen in hot pursuit.

One feral dog took an arrow to the leg but, even limping, continued to flee. The soldier behind it drew his scimitar and leaned down, intent on ending the creature with a slash. They galloped wildly, snow frothing under their hooves. An explosive shriek rang out, and a long arrow came hurtling in from the west. The pursuing soldier instantly toppled from his mount. Foot still caught in the stirrup, the man was dragged all the way across the border by the galloping horse.

Shit!

Sumong felt a pressing sense of dread. Amur had been firm in his instructions not to engage Qidong right now. As long as they stayed put in

their territory, Qi Zhuyin couldn’t step out to engage them. He tugged on the reins and shouted, “Fall back!”

But ahead of them, torches were flaring to life one after another, until their surroundings were lit as bright as day.

“Qi Zhuyin!” Sumong cursed her in the Zhou tongue. “Devious woman __”

As one, the Qidong Garrison Troops raised their shields. The cold steel of their blades glinted in the firelight.

Qi Zhuyin stood in front of her combat-ready troops in full battle array. Crushing a clump of snow beneath her boot, she drawled, “Light the beacon tower. Tell Qudu: The Qingshu tribe has breached our border and invaded our territory.”

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Chapter 211:
Hard Frost

THICK CLOUD COVER swallowed up what little light was left in the sky. Libei's falcons soared across the vast horizon. Meng was the first to swoop down. Amid the cries of the other birds, he spread his wings, dispersing the thin fog with the tips of his feathers as he looked down upon the expanse of pure white snow. The saker falcons swept in from the south like a volley of sharp arrows streaking straight toward the Libei falcons. Letting out a piercing screech, Meng banked, brushing the tops of the military banners below. The pounding of war drums reverberated through the Chashi Sinkhole.

Biansha Horsemen surged up from the south with the unstoppable momentum of a tidal wave. The armored cavalry held steady. Only once the scimitars of the Biansha Horsemen were within view did Yin Chang draw his old saber with a shriek of metal and throw his head back, roaring, "Open the trenches!"

The Imperial Army, who had been lying face down in the snow, released their grip on the ropes at both ends of the line, exposing the freshly dug trenches. The Biansha Horsemen, renowned for their speed, were fast approaching the lip of the first ditch. Their riders yanked on the reins too late; the horses plunged in, breaking their front knees on impact in a chorus of awful cracks.

The leading troops tumbled into the trenches, throwing the front lines into disarray. The Imperial Army drew their blades and jumped down to

engage the enemy. Without slowing, the Biansha Horsemen at the rear spurred their horses to leap over the trenches, continuing their forward charge.

Yin Chang hacked down Biansha Horsemen left and right, dodging the hooves flying over his head. A moment of inattention and his skull would be kicked to a bloody pulp. Ducking, he shouted across the field, “Lao-Hu, what the hell?! You dug these too fucking narrow!”

Tantai Hu’s palms were slick with sweat. Eyes fixed on the Biansha Horsemen galloping toward them, he registered Yin Chang’s shouts but didn’t dare divert his attention long enough to answer. Gripping his twin blades, he silently recited Tantai Long’s name.

A Biansha pony’s hooves reared inches from his face, the rider’s scimitar singing toward him. Tantai Hu dropped and rolled, and Xiao Chiye, behind him, struck with Wolfsfang in a flash, using the rider’s own momentum to stab the blade through him. Blood rained down. The garrison troops followed close behind Tantai Hu as he ducked and slashed his blade across the ponies’ legs.

The ponies screamed and tossed their heads as they crashed to the ground like wild geese brought down. The Horsemen rolled off the fallen ponies. Tantai Hu swiped blood from his face, lifted both blades, and roared, “Now is the time for our revenge!”

After being thwarted twice, the Biansha Horsemen slowed their charge, no longer daring to advance so rashly. But they were already upon the Imperial Army. It was too late to retreat; Xiao Chiye was now advancing.

Xiao Chiye tapped Snowcrest’s flank with the flat of his blade, and the horse surged ahead. The hooves of the Libei Armored Cavalry echoed like

thunder as they rolled forward like the leading edge of the storm. They crashed into the Biansha Horsemen, splintering what remained of their formation. Libei's war chariot formation left the Biansha Horsemen no room to breathe. As soon as the heavy armor knocked them to the ground, the iron horseshoes of the Libei Armored Cavalry flattened the Biansha Horsemen's bodies, trampling flesh and blood.

A saker falcon skimmed past overhead, wind trailing in its wake as it fled east. Meng stooped, diving through the snow, and snatched the other bird in his talons. As they soared past Libei's wolf banner, he ripped off one of the saker falcon's wings and flung the bird away.

The Biansha Horsemen retreated like the tide. One young general galloped through, shouting a barrage of rapid commands in the Biansha tongue. The regular soldiers withdrew, and the Scorpions shot to the fore. Scimitars vanished as the horsemen retreated, eyes locked on the Libei Armored Cavalry.

Xiao Chiye returned to his troops, and the columns of cavalrymen who had rushed out on all sides followed suit and swiftly merged back into the ranks. Scorpions filled in the gaps where the Biansha vanguard troops had been. Yet the iron hammers they wielded no longer faced one armored cavalry, but their combined forces.

Libei's troops rallied to meet them. Xiao Chiye, at the head of the charge, slammed Wolfsfang back into its sheath. Following his lead, the armored cavalry behind him drew those new sabers of terrifying length. Xiao Chiye crouched low in the saddle as his soldiers sliced ferociously into the ranks of the Scorpions, flashes of steel glinting in the night.

He spun the hilt in his hands and lopped off a Scorpion's head. To reduce its weight, the sharp steel of the long blade was honed thin. Its fine edge slit throats in the blink of an eye. Blood spattered over his iron armguard before spilling to the ground.

The iron hammers couldn't match the speed of the long blades, and they didn't have the reach to hit the armored cavalrymen wielding them. The Scorpions watched helplessly as the Libei Armored Cavalry cut through their formation and cleaved their ranks in half.

Snowcrest broke through the Biansha Horsemen surrounding them and snorted as it spun to face their enemies anew. Xiao Chiye lowered his saber and flicked off the dark blood that clung to its edge.

Scorpions on both sides panted as they watched their entire center unit tumble off their horses. Everywhere Xiao Chiye passed, blood flowed like rivers. His long blade struck the heads off nearly everyone in his path.

A Scorpion pulled at his reins as he murmured in the Biansha tongue, "Chidaq…"

The Libei Armored Cavalry spurred their horses forward again. The Scorpions, unwilling to continue, wheeled their horses around at the first sound of that muffled thunder. When the young Biansha general at the rear saw the Scorpions retreating, he frantically brandished his blade to berate them, to no avail. Fear had been sown in the hearts of every Scorpion. Following the loss of their leader, they had been reduced to sacrifices on the battlefield.

Snowcrest galloped at the head of the charge, the Libei Armored Cavalry close behind.

The Biansha troops here on the south side of the sinkhole were powerless to resist the onslaught; their scimitars couldn't pierce Libei's heavy armor. Those who had lost their ponies scrambled to flee on foot through the snow, their urgent clouds of breath like the white spray of floodwater breaching its dam. The snow-covered ground quaked as the Libei Armored Cavalry pounded over it. A Biansha Horseman who had fallen behind the rest dropped to the ground, his scimitar flying from his hand. Before he could draw his pike dagger, he was swallowed up by the hooves of the armored cavalry.

Xiao Chiye broke away from the vanguard and pursued the Biansha Horsemen just as Xiao Fangxu had done thirty years ago, the iron hooves of his horse showing no mercy to his foe. The Libei Armored Cavalry rampaged behind him.

Tantai Hu watched as the heavy armor cut through the battlefield like grim blades unleashed from their sheaths.

A Scorpion shouted as he fled on his horse, "Chidaq!"

The terrible wolf!

Seven years ago, Xiao Jiming had led his troops south over the Glacial River, earning himself the name Iron Horse on River Ice. Tonight, Xiao Chiye chased the Biansha Horsemen for twenty li, the echoes of the cavalry's hoofbeats reverberating throughout the land.

"Damn." Yin Chang's throat bobbed. He scraped blood off his face and murmured a stream of curses.

Xiao Chiye's Libei Armored Cavalry swept over the earth like a wave of hard frost. Not a single blade of grass was left standing in its wake.

Shen Zechuan was brewing tea in his tent. The prefectural governor, inept at the art of tea, had merely dumped coarse tea leaves into the teapot, filled it with water, and set it on the fire to boil. His folding fan rested on his knee, and a stack of documents sat on the desk beside him, yet his eyes were fixed on the pot, watching as it gradually started to boil and bubble over.

Haerigu was squatting at the entrance of the tent, peeking through the flaps. He turned to Fei Sheng. “That’s not how you make tea, right?”

Fei Sheng had no favorable impression of this Scorpion. He looked straight ahead, arms folded over his chest, listening to the urgent beat of the war drums. “You’re not gonna be drinking it, so what are you worrying about?”

Shen Zechuan stared into space for a long interval. By the time he snapped out of it, the tea had almost evaporated. He lifted the teapot off the fire, added more water, and let it continue to boil. The burble and hiss covered some of the noise of the drums, the rhythmic beat of which put him in a trance. He hadn’t gotten a thing done tonight.

Seeing the late hour, Fei Sheng lifted the flap and stepped inside. He said softly, “Master, how about a quick nap? The moment there’s news from the battlefield, I’ll wake you.”

Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes and didn’t answer.

Fei Sheng understood this as refusal; he didn’t dare persuade him further and retreated to the entrance of the tent to wait. The tea in the tent boiled the entire night. Just before dawn, Shen Zechuan heard the war drums fall still.

He rose and pushed aside the flap. Fei Sheng draped a cloak over his shoulders and stood close as Shen Zechuan stepped outside. Shen Zechuan waited in that snowy mist painted with the first glimmer of dawn. It was frigid this morning, the north wind whipping at their faces like knives, and the cold turning anyone's nose red if they stood outside even a moment too long. After almost an hour, Shen Zechuan heard the rising beat of hooves, followed by row upon row of dark silhouettes overlapping as they emerged from the fog. Meng, flying ahead, was the first to reach the camp.

The sigh Fei Sheng heaved was as if a boulder had been lifted off his back. "Master, they did it!"

Meng circled, wanting to land on Shen Zechuan. He wasn't wearing his arm guard today, but still he lifted his arm; at that moment, a whistle sounded a short distance away.

Breaking through the expanse of heavy fog, Xiao Chiye galloped toward them without slowing. He charged straight into the campground and swept Shen Zechuan up in his arms. Snowcrest slowed, then turned to race away again into the fog with both men on its back. Meng, whose talons had grasped empty air, landed on the wolf banner instead and wiped his talons clean as he watched them with his head cocked.

Yin Chang, arms cradling another gory war trophy, started forward to call after them. Fei Sheng yanked him back before he could open his mouth. The rest of the group wore an array of expressions. Tantai Hu spat on his palms and rubbed them together to warm them. "Everyone, inside. The military reports can wait. There's no hurry. No hurry," he repeated, louder, which only made his attempt at a cover-up all the more conspicuous.

“Whaddaya mean, ‘no hurry’?” Yin Chang craned his neck to look around, exclaiming, “We have to head back to the city at daybreak. The governor is very much in a hurry!”

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Chapter 212:
Give and Take

SNOWCREST CARRIED them away from the camp, but they didn't go far. The horse came to a stop on a snowy slope north of the Chashi Sinkhole. The humidity from the mist and snow made Shen Zechuan feel as if they had ridden through a vast expanse of rolling smoke on the surface of a great lake. Everywhere he looked was awash in white.

Xiao Chiye dismounted and removed his helmet. Sweat dampened his temples, and he was slightly out of breath, yet his eyes were alight. "Can you see Duanzhou?"

Still holding Snowcrest's reins, Shen Zechuan removed the blue handkerchief from his sleeve and handed it to Xiao Chiye. Only a glimpse of the abandoned relay station's watchtower, far in the distance, was visible amid the white clouds of his breath, but he understood Xiao Chiye's jubilation. "Looking at Duanzhou now is like looking into my own pocket."

Xiao Chiye raised his chin. Beads of sweat trickled down his face. He grinned. Shen Zechuan gazed at him, realizing he still retained the unyielding, untamable nature he'd first displayed during their time in Qudu—that spirit Shen Zechuan yearned to possess.

He leaned down in the saddle, his breath fanning warm against Xiao Chiye's cheeks. The tip of his nose pressed against Xiao Chiye's skin and edged along his temple. There, he tasted Xiao Chiye's sweat as he wished. The salty astringency dissolved in Shen Zechuan's mouth. His throat bobbed slightly. "This is your riding track from now on."

Xiao Chiye looped a hand around the back of Shen Zechuan's neck; his fingers, wrapped in the iron armor he had yet to remove, were hard and cold against the delicate skin there, a touch like the warning steel of a blade.

"I don't want a riding track." The straight bridge of Xiao Chiye's nose nuzzled along the pulse at Shen Zechuan's throat. Then he glanced up and watched, unblinking, as Shen Zechuan lowered his expressive eyes. An edge of danger crept into his voice as he said, "I want Shen Lanzhou."

Shen Zechuan breathed out a puff of hot air at Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye thought Shen Zechuan was about to kiss him—instead, his Lanzhou took the chance to pluck the blue handkerchief from his hand. Straightening, he wrapped his cloak tighter around himself. The prefectural governor, so sensitive to the cold, left only his eyes and the reddened tips of his ears exposed as he said, muffled, "Shen Lanzhou's freezing to death."

Xiao Chiye, his arms empty, had yet to realize what had just happened.

Shen Zechuan watched Xiao Chiye's expression undergo several changes. When he looked as though he was going to make a grab for him, Shen Zechuan snapped the reins and urged Snowcrest into a gallop, riding back alone toward the camp. Xiao Chiye stood in the snow, helmet in his arms, and felt a lingering warmth where Shen Zechuan had licked his temple. He touched it, gradually overcome with the vexation of an innocent maiden teased by a frivolous philanderer.

"Shen Lanzhou…" Xiao Chiye watched as Shen Zechuan fled. Striding ahead on his long legs, he slid down the snowbank after him. "Heartless cad!"

Achi had been confident of victory, yet he had been soundly defeated at the Chashi Sinkhole. The Biansha people, who had been winning battles in the north for half a year, had never expected Achi to lose to Xiao Chiye. The few remaining soldiers in Duanzhou had collapsed in the face of Wu Ziyu's surprise attack. In the space of a few days, all six prefectures of Zhongbo came under Shen Zechuan's rule.

Qudu received the news only seven days later. At the same time, the report of Qi Zhuyin's mobilization against the Qingshu tribe made its way into the palace.

Inside Mingli Hall, behind the bead curtain, the empress dowager flung down the memorial. The eastern pearls at her ears swayed as she said to the ministers in the hall, tempered rage in every word, "Did the Ministry of War not reject Qidong's request to deploy troops? Chen Zhen, you handle military affairs. Did you not express yourself clearly enough?"

Chen Zhen, the Minister of War, went immediately to his knees. He knew the empress dowager was merely venting her anger. Qi Zhuyin had a strong and well-trained army; Qudu was unwilling to offend them, and so the empress dowager could only take her frustration out on easy marks like him. He listened expressionlessly until she was done before saying, "In the first month of the year, Marshal Qi presented a memorial to the court, hoping to deploy troops against the Qingshu tribe. We rejected her request on the grounds that we lacked the military provisions. The Grand Secretariat kept a copy of the correspondence; Grand Secretary Kong Qiu and the other ministers are all aware of it."

The empress dowager knew this had not been in any way authorized by the Ministry of War, yet she was still fuming. After a moment's pause, she

asked, “What reason did she give this time?”

“Seven days ago, the Qingshu tribe attacked the Bianjun Commandery’s night patrol.” Chen Zhen lifted his head slightly. “Marshal Qi was forced to respond.”

Han Cheng spoke up. “Amur is at war with Libei in the north. Why would the Qingshu tribe provoke Qidong without good reason?” He had been on the receiving end of Qi Zhuyin’s frostiness when he’d escorted Hua Xiangyi to Qidong. Sitting in the hall now, he bared his teeth in a smile. “Then again, isn’t it a curious coincidence that Marshal Qi happened to be in the Bianjun Commandery just as the Qingshu tribe launched their surprise attack? This battle was so abrupt and fiercely fought that the report of victory is presented together with the request to deploy. Whether or not she is at fault, she has already succeeded.”

Kong Qiu, who had taken ill after the new year, sat in the hall as well, his complexion ashen. He covered his mouth and coughed. “We cannot listen to only one side of the story. If the Qingshu tribe genuinely crossed the line, then Marshal Qi’s mobilization was emergent. The situation on the frontier has been unstable for years now. When Lu Guangbai was still stationed at the Bianjun Commandery, the Qingshu tribe frequently breached our border. We need further details from the marshal. Our most urgent concern now is how long this conflict will continue. We are about to enter the spring plowing season, and the thirteen cities of Juexi are still waiting for arrangements to be made. Supplying Qidong with provisions is indeed a major concern.”

Pan Xiangjie timidly folded his hands into his sleeves. Xue Xiuzhuo’s plan to investigate Dancheng had been stuck at an impasse for weeks now. But with the fields still in dispute, he didn’t dare to speak up for fear the

Grand Secretariat would look to the Pan Clan to make up the shortfall of military provisions.

The empress dowager had denied Qi Zhuyin's request for two reasons: First, any troops Qidong deployed against Biansha now would be a boon to Libei. And second, Xue Xiuzhuo had been relentless in his pursuit of the eight cities' accounts.

A move against any one of the Eight Great Clans would lead to major consequences for all of them. Fiefs and farmlands were their families' roots; the young masters of the eight cities all depended on the income from these fields to survive. If a full investigation were to be launched, the noble clans would suffer a debilitating loss of wealth from having to return the fields to the commoners and make up the arrears in taxes—not to mention the risk of dismissal and prosecution, as well as imprisonment or death.

Now that Qi Zhuyin was at war with the Qingshu tribe, the expense of the five commanderies' military salaries and provisions would go through the Ministry of Revenue. Once the state treasury ran out of money, certain events from the reign of Yongyi would no doubt be dredged up again. The empress dowager was acting in place of the heir apparent, who stood beside her, eyeing the throne. She dared not act in haste. The noble clans didn't know the true extent of Amur's rapacious ambition, but they did know that, given the current situation, it was inadvisable to delay. Zhongbo was already a major headache. Getting themselves into a standoff with the heir apparent and the Grand Secretariat would do the noble clans no good.

"If the Qingshu tribe has invaded, Qi Zhuyin need only beat them back; there is no call to mobilize more troops to pursue them into enemy territory." The empress dowager's fury had subsided. She deliberated a

moment, then continued, “The days are cold and conditions poor on the frontier. No doubt the battle with the Biansha people must be fought, but now is not the time. It’s just as the Grand Secretary said—the spring plowing is around the corner. We must make the common people our priority. Not all of Juexi’s territories had good harvests last year, and the granaries in Qudu have yet to be filled. Where will the imperial court find the grain for Qidong to fight a war? Our limitations must be conveyed properly to Qi Zhuyin. She assists her father in the administration of the five commanderies, does she not? She should know this.”

Silence descended over Mingli Hall. The hanging screens at the entrance were tucked in securely to keep out the draft, but the news of Qi Zhuyin’s deployment had made the atmosphere in the hall heavy and grave.

In truth, both Kong Qiu and Cen Yu agreed with Qi Zhuyin’s proposal to fight the Qingshu tribe. Unfortunately, they were locked in a stalemate with the noble clans. The Ministry of Revenue was presently controlled by Pan Lin, but he had his hands full with Xue Xiuzhuo’s accusations and no energy to spare for a discussion of Qidong’s military salaries and provisions. And because the Pan Clan was first to bear the brunt of this investigation, Pan Xiangjie didn’t dare let his son get too involved with the Grand Secretariat.

Pan Xiangjie was used to playing fence-sitter. It was thanks to his ability to sway wherever the wind blew that he had survived thus far. He didn’t wish to offend Xue Xiuzhuo *or* the empress dowager. He was unwilling to let the Pan Clan take any side before a clear victor emerged in the tussle for power in Qudu. In the past, he had thrown in his lot with Hua Siqian and Wei Huaigu only to be used as a scapegoat. Now more wary, he trusted not a soul among any of the three parties vying for power.

Cen Yu let out a quiet sigh. He rarely spoke in Mingli Hall these days. Yu Xiaozai had left the capital with the letter he'd written Shen Zechuan, yet Shen Zechuan had never replied. He understood the meaning of that well enough. They had all been drinking in his house together just a year ago. He still remembered the distinguished figures Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye had cut then. It was a pity the way things had turned out.

He shifted his gaze to Li Jianting, who was sitting off to one side with her back straight, staring at the tea before her as if she hadn't heard the discussion in the hall.

When court adjourned, Cen Yu and Kong Qiu walked down the long path out of the palace, already cleared of snow. The palace eaves on both sides swooped low, shrouding the pathway in an oppressive dimness. A eunuch walked in front of them, holding a lantern to light their way. Cen Yu's sleeves flapped in the wind, which also swept through his short, newly grown beard; he lifted a hand to smooth it.

"Why didn't you say a word today? This is an important matter," Kong Qiu said.

Cen Yu lifted his eyes. "Her Majesty's mind is made up. The result will be the same whether I speak or not."

It was dark by the time the two stepped out of the palace gate. Instead of boarding his carriage, Cen Yu carried the lantern himself and walked down the snow-covered roads with Kong Qiu.

"You seem to have much on your mind today, Xunyi." Kong Qiu scrutinized him. "What are you thinking about?"

"A year ago today," Cen Yu answered, "Vice Commander Shen and

Marquis Xiao were both still in Qudu.”

If the Tianchen Emperor hadn’t been assassinated, perhaps they would still be here now. Cen Yu had always had an appreciation for talent. He had once hoped to convince Shen Zechuan to join the imperial court as an official. Alas, fate had other plans—Shen Wei’s crime was too heavy a burden.

Kong Qiu heaved a long sigh and thought of Hai Liangyi.

“If the Tianchen Emperor had possessed even a fraction of the current heir’s disposition, would you and I be reduced to such a state? I’ve been feeling more and more out of my depth lately. There is simply too much beyond my ability to salvage. They disapprove of the war Marshal Qi is waging with the Qingshu tribe only out of fear that the need for military provisions will drag the eight cities’ ill-gotten gains into the debate. But the war in Libei is at a critical juncture. Even the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu, gave his life to it. The strength and the capabilities of the Biansha tribes can no longer be underestimated.” Cen Yu saw this all clearly, but it was futile. He couldn’t resolve the conflict in Qudu with eloquence alone. Persuading the noble clans to relinquish their stolen assets was as difficult as reaching a hand up to touch the sky.

They hadn’t walked far when they spied a figure standing under a bamboo umbrella just ahead of them, waiting. Cen Yu and Kong Qiu traded looks and then, together, looked back at Xue Xiuzhuo.

Xue Xiuzhuo’s official’s robe was brand new, and he wore no padded coat over it despite the cold. Standing there all by his lonesome, sleeves fluttering in the wind, he had the quality of a floating leaf among torrential currents. He closed his umbrella and bowed in greeting.

“Why are you standing here?” Kong Qiu asked. “Is something the matter?”

Floating snow drifted past as Xue Xiuzhuo straightened to address them. “This humble official has been waiting here for my two esteemed teachers, in order to discuss the issue of Dancheng’s fields and taxes in detail.”

Cen Yu frowned slightly. “Affairs of the imperial court should be settled in the imperial court; there is no reason to discuss them in private. You should take care with this case in particular to avoid any appearance of impropriety. If others saw us, rumors would inevitably spread. Go home. We’ll discuss this in the Grand Secretariat’s office tomorrow morning after court.”

“If not for the urgency of this matter, this humble official would naturally not dare bother you here.” Xue Xiuzhuo’s expression remained unchanged. “At the beginning of the month, Her Majesty drew up a decree to have a key official from the Ministry of Revenue join the investigation of this case. Pan Lin appointed Liang Cuishan, an official in charge of salt taxes in Hezhou and Juexi.”

Kong Qiu and Cen Yu both knew Liang Cuishan’s name. Xiao Chiye himself had vouched for the man and recommended him for an official position after the incident with the public ditches. He was also the Ministry of Revenue official personally appointed by the Tianchen Emperor to investigate Wei Huaigu in the case of the moldy military provisions, and a talented administrator of financial affairs and taxes. Last year, he and Jiang Qingshan had sorted out all the old accounts of the thirteen cities of Juexi,

and while in Hezhou, he had managed the transportation of grain levies for a time.

Yan Heru had told Shen Zechuan business along the waterways was tough these days, and that the Yan Clan's goods heading for Juexi were all subjected to rigorous checks. Liang Cuishan was the reason for this. The man was smooth and diplomatic in his work, but he was not a slippery character. The tax money passing through his hands every day numbered tens of thousands of silver taels, and yet any attempts Yan Heru made to pull strings or make backroom deals had been promptly rebuffed.

"Liang Cuishan has just returned to the capital. He will enter the palace tomorrow morning to make his report." Xue Xiuzhuo tucked his closed umbrella under his arm. "He's unlikely to come out of it unscathed. It's important that he meet with both of you tonight."

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Chapter 213:
Entropy

LIANG CUISHAN wasn't wearing his official's robe; instead, he had on an old, sheepskin-lined jacket and a pair of modest, black fabric shoes. With his short beard, square face, and tanned complexion from running around outdoors all day, he was the total antithesis of the man venerated by the common people as "His Excellency Chongshen." His hands seemed not the kind that held brushes, but plows. When Cen Yu saw him waiting for them beneath the lanterns outside the relay station, he almost took him for a common footman.

"Chongshen, what on earth happened to you?" Cen Yu asked in astonishment.

Liang Cuishan led them upstairs and waited for them to take their seats before answering. "It's a long story. This humble subordinate has no regrets in life now that both of Your Excellencies have agreed to come see me!" He turned to Xue Xiuzhuo and dropped in a deep bow. "Your Excellency saved me from calamity today. This humble subordinate shall never forget this kindness as long as I live!"

Xue Xiuzhuo wiped his hands with the warmed handkerchief waiting in the room, then took a seat modestly off to one side. "This is a matter of utmost urgency. Please, go ahead and speak."

"What is it?" Kong Qiu eyed Liang Cuishan. "You shouldn't be back in Qudu until the day after tomorrow."

“Time is tight, so this humble subordinate dared not tarry on the road. To tell the truth, that’s why I dressed like this—to avoid drawing unwanted attention.” As Liang Cuishan spoke, he fished an account book out from under his jacket and set it down lightly by Cen Yu’s hand. “Your Excellency has always supervised the Ministry of Revenue’s audits of accounts. You’ll be familiar with this kind of account book. Please take a look.”

Cen Yu flipped the book open and looked through it for a few moments before venturing, “Is this not the account book the city of Chuancheng submitted to the Ministry of Revenue earlier this year?”

“That’s right. It’s the account book of the Helian Marquis from Chuancheng. Along with the accounts of the rest of the seven cities, it was submitted at the beginning of spring to be reviewed by the Ministry of Revenue and the Chief Surveillance Bureau. The aim was to straighten out the details of their taxes and expenditures. At the time, no one saw any issue with it.” Liang Cuishan produced another book from his jacket. “This account book, on the other hand, has been redone by this humble subordinate over the past few days.”

Cen Yu’s countenance changed the instant he saw the first page. “How did you come up with these numbers?”

Expression solemn, Liang Cuishan organized his thoughts before continuing. “Her Majesty issued an imperial edict at the end of last month regarding the investigation of Dancheng’s fields. Vice Minister Pan ordered this humble subordinate to assist the Court of Judicial Review. At the time, I was in Yongcheng, in Juexi, reviewing the thirteen cities’ sales taxes with Lord Jiang.”

Within a few days, Liang Cuishan had received a visitation card from Juexi's grain levies intendant at the relay station where he was staying. It was his habit to refuse all visitors while attending to official duties, but this intendant took the opportunity to leave Liang Cuishan a small gift. Liang Cuishan had opened it to find a small fortune in gold.

"Juexi is well connected to Dicheng and Hezhou through its waterways, and the grain levies intendant is in charge of all affairs relating to the levies' transport by water from Juexi to Qudu. It's a lucrative position. I was operating out of the Provincial Administration Commission of Juexi, working directly with Jiang Qingshan. I didn't dare act rashly and risk alerting the perpetrator."

The position of grain levies intendant shared some similarities with Liang Cuishan's own, except that it didn't hold as much authority—Liang Cuishan concurrently oversaw two major regions. Even so, the grain levies intendant wielded considerable influence in a place like Juexi. Liang Cuishan was wary of making any move that might tip off whomever was behind the bribe. In fact, he had suspected at the time that this man had come at Jiang Qingshan's behest.

Liang Cuishan was a cautious man. He had endured and toiled away for years at the lower levels of bureaucracy to rise through the ranks. As such, he was extremely mindful as he navigated official circles. He wanted to be a capable minister, yes, but he also wanted to stay alive. Juexi was Jiang Qingshan's territory. If he rashly submitted a memorial to impeach this grain levies intendant, the document might not even make it out of Juexi. Besides, everyone remembered how Jiang Qingshan had opened the granaries to distribute relief grain in the fourth year of Xiande and had taken full

responsibility for the aftermath. The act had sent shockwaves through the imperial court and citizenry alike. The man was well-loved and held in high esteem in all thirteen cities of Juexi. Liang Cuishan had no chance of winning against him in the court of public opinion. Furthermore, any discerning eye could see that Jiang Qingshan was Xue Xiuzhuo's blade.

"I tossed and turned all night at the relay station. I couldn't accept the gold, but I also worried it would sow the seeds of disaster if it was hastily returned." At this point, Liang Cuishan cast a glance at Xue Xiuzhuo. "Moreover, Lord Jiang has an unimpeachable reputation. I worked with him for quite some time and more or less achieved some understanding of his character. With all this in mind, I decided to ask the grain levies intendant to come see me."

This was a dangerous and risky move. Liang Cuishan, who didn't dare act prematurely, was counting on gleaning more information from this meeting. At the very least, he had to ascertain if Jiang Qingshan was the one sending the grain levies intendant with bribes.

"The grain levies intendant oversees all matters pertaining to the shipment of grain levies from the thirteen cities to the capital," Kong Qiu said. "Getting his hands on the money wouldn't be difficult. But the censors under the Chief Surveillance Bureau have their eyes on the accounts as well, and the origins of the grain shipments are all clearly marked. How could he have expected to get away with it?"

"I was wondering the same thing," Liang Cuishan said. "I pretended I was too scared to accept the gold and asked the intendant to take it back. That's when he told me those taels were clean—they hadn't come out of Juexi's accounts."

Cen Yu closed the account book. “He’s in charge of the shipment of grain levies via the waterways. If this money wasn’t recorded in Juexi’s accounts,” he said, “then it likely came from—”

It most likely came from Dicheng or Hezhou.

“Yan Heru of Hezhou is a conniving and unscrupulous man. When I audited the grain levy shipments in Hezhou last year, he attempted to bribe me. But Yan Heru is immensely wealthy. There’s no need for him to risk embezzling money from the imperial court’s own accounts.” Liang Cuishan chose his words more carefully as he turned to the subject of Dicheng. “The prefect of Dicheng is the son of a concubine, a woman from the Fei Clan who married into the Hua Clan. The empress dowager is partial to him, and his track record of political achievements in the reviews these past years has been outstanding as well. I didn’t dare accuse anyone without any evidence, so I kept in contact with the grain levies intendant in the hope of obtaining more details.”

A bribe necessitated a favor in kind, especially for someone in Liang Cuishan’s position. He’d initially taken the grain levies intendant for Jiang Qingshan’s man and assumed he’d come to offer a bribe because Liang Cuishan was auditing Juexi’s salt taxes. But very quickly, he’d realized he was wrong. Since these gold taels had not come out of Juexi’s coffers, then there must be someone else behind the grain levies intendant, and this person could only be a high-ranking official from a noble clan close to Dicheng.

Liang Cuishan didn’t dare accuse the Hua Clan of Dicheng, the empress dowager’s clan and birth home. When Hua Siqian had fallen from power, the only property the imperial court had confiscated from the Hua Clan was Hua Siqian’s own manor. In less than a year, the empress dowager

had thrust herself back onto the political stage, and now she was effectively governing the whole empire. Even if Liang Cuishan was a much gutsier man, he wouldn't dare point the finger at the empress dowager.

But he needed only think of this matter from Qudu's perspective to understand what these gold taels were meant to buy. Who would be most affected when the empress dowager eventually sent Liang Cuishan to investigate the farmlands in Dancheng with the Court of Judicial Review? Obviously, it was the Pan Clan of Dancheng.

At this point, Cen Yu had already figured it out. After going around in such a big circle, it could only be the Helian Marquis who tried to bribe Liang Cuishan through the grain levies intendant in hope of saving the Pan Clan. The Helian Marquis's daughter, Commandery Princess Zhaoyue, had married the Pan Clan's son, while the marquis's common-born son was betrothed to a daughter of the Hua Clan. Fei Kun, the Helian Marquis, was the only one who had all the right connections—but this move of his was truly unwise.

Liang Cuishan owed Pan Lin a debt of gratitude for his rise within the Ministry of Revenue. While Pan Lin had initially promoted him as a favor to Xiao Chiye, Liang Cuishan had proven himself exceedingly capable. Pan Lin had thus been more than happy to let him exercise his talents. As long as Liang Cuishan had a smidgen of self-interest, he would think twice before accusing the Pan Clan of any wrongdoing in Dancheng. This was something he could hardly refute. However, after receiving this bribe from the Helian Marquis, Liang Cuishan only needed to keep his mouth shut about it, and he could consider his debt to Pan Lin paid. He would no longer be encumbered by any obligation to him while investigating Dancheng's accounts.

And that wasn’t all. Following the trail of the bribe, Liang Cuishan had secretly re-examined the eight cities’ accounts, paying special attention to the accounts of the Helian Marquis’s Fei Clan in the city of Chuancheng. The supposedly clean money had in truth been garnished from invisible checkpoints the noble clans had set up within their own cities for barges and merchant caravans that crossed into their territories. To gain passage, the merchants had no choice but to pay these private taxes to the noble clans, which were double what they’d already paid to the central government. Later, Yan Heru had joined the fray. Hoping to recoup the money he had forked out in taxes, he stepped into the vacancy left by the Xi Clan and resold local resources—copper, iron, and salt mined from various regions—on behalf of the noble clans and local officials, thereby bypassing official border tariffs. His lucrative brokerage in Dunzhou was thus established.

Cen Yu reopened the account book Liang Cuishan had put into order and stared at the sum of silver written there for a dizzying moment. They had been tangled in an endless struggle with the noble clans for so many years. A great number of capable officials had all met their ends in the quest to get to the bottom of the noble clans’ accounts. The secret account books of Hua Siqian and Pan Rugui that Hai Liangyi had dug up during the reign of Xiande had been merely the tip of the iceberg.

Although the good days of the reign of Yongyi had been short-lived, the taxation system the Guangcheng Emperor had established was the source of the largest share of the state treasury’s annual revenue. The Zhou empire’s rapid decline over the past decade was inextricably linked to the court’s bad debts—the empire had been hollowed out from the inside, with all this money flowing into the pockets of the noble clans.

Cen Yu could barely remain steady in his seat. His hands holding the account book were trembling. In addition to the tax money, there was also the appropriation of fields. Cen Yu didn't have to do the math; he could imagine how colossal the bleed from the state treasury was.

"When Libei rode to Zhongbo's rescue during the reign of Xiande, it received no military salaries or provisions. Xiao Jiming was forced to rely on whatever the soldiers had farmed themselves to sustain them while they rode south to defend us from the Biansha Horsemen." Cen Yu's breathing quickened as he flipped the pages with shaking fingers. "Qidong received no military salaries and provisions then either. Lu Guangbai marched north with reinforcements, fed and paid with Qi Zhuyin's own dowry. Over the past few years, Qi Shiyu has sold nearly all his estates to afford the upkeep of the garrison troops. Then there was the time in the first year of Tianchen when the Qingshu tribe fought all the way to the Bianjun Commandery's doorstep. Lu Guangbai's army was so starved they were eating sand!"

Every time. Every single time.

The commanding generals from the north and south only came to the capital to beg for money. Qi Zhuyin had been reduced to fraternizing with the loan sharks in Qudu. Meanwhile, Lu Guangbai hadn't been granted a single audience with the emperor during the entire reign of Xiande. And how many had died during the drought in Juexi? Jiang Qingshan had gritted his teeth and opened the granaries to distribute relief to the people while his octogenarian mother wove cloth to pay his debts. With no money or grain, the six prefectures of Zhongbo had rotted away, forcing Zhou Gui, Luo Mu, Huo Qing, and the rest to bow down to the bandits.

This was what the Ministry of Revenue meant when they cried poor.

Seething, Cen Yu flung the book onto the table. “The fields appropriated by the eight cities aren’t even included in this. This is all blood money.” He was beginning to choke up. “The secretariat elder went so far in pursuing this. The country almost perished during the reign of Xiande. How can it possibly be saved?! It cannot!”

Silence settled over the room. Liang Cuishan hung his head wordlessly. He was drifting duckweed, a man without roots or connections. If he wanted to continue delving into this corruption, he needed someone powerful to cling to. After much thought, he had communicated his findings to Jiang Qingshan, who had connected him with Xue Xiuzhuo. Only through him had he finally managed to see Kong Qiu and Cen Yu. He had not yet given the Helian Marquis the favor he had wanted, but it was pointless for him to simply hold onto the gold and do nothing—he needed a backer, someone to protect him. Otherwise, if he declined to doctor the accounts as the Helian Marquis wished upon arriving in Dancheng, he would surely die. Not even Pan Lin would be able to save him.

The handkerchief Xue Xiuzhuo had set aside had gone cold. “I hoped to stay out of this due to my own conflict of interest, but this concerns Chongshen’s safety and involves the investigation of the farmland in Dancheng. As you see, I have no choice but to discuss the matter with my esteemed teachers.” He poured tea for Cen Yu and Kong Qiu as he spoke. “When I heard the news of Qidong’s deployment today, I assumed the Ministry of Revenue would try to shirk responsibility again. All the chickens are coming home to roost; at this rate, I fear the spring plowing and Qidong’s military provisions will be delayed.”

Kong Qiu was more than a little wary of Xue Xiuzhuo. His move with the heir apparent had been far too daring and dangerous. What was more, he'd used the Imperial College riots to edge out the officials of humble origins, resulting in the present rise of his pragmatist faction. The entire incident had left a bad taste in Kong Qiu's mouth. His intuition, finely honed from his many years of service in the Ministry of Justice, told him in no uncertain terms that Xue Xiuzhuo would never be truly at a loss. "Surely you didn't call us here just to look at these account books."

"One matter at a time." Xue Xiuzhuo took on a more businesslike tone, setting aside that address of *esteemed teacher*. "The Grand Secretary didn't question Marshal Qi's deployment of troops in Mingli Hall earlier. I presume you approve of it. But the Ministry of Revenue is indeed hard-pressed to bear the expense of salaries and provisions considering the depleted state treasury. That was why you did not exhort Her Majesty on the subject."

"That's right." Kong Qiu had grown steadier and more composed since Hai Liangyi's death, and he spoke evenly now. "Marshal Qi's mobilization against the Qingshu tribe may look like a move to aid Libei, but in fact, Biansha's incursion does not only threaten Libei—it threatens all of Great Zhou. Amur has lofty ambitions. No egg stays unbroken when the nest overturns; no one will escape unscathed if our empire is invaded. Aiding Libei now *is* aiding our Great Zhou."

Xue Xiuzhuo retrieved a booklet from his sleeve and pushed it toward Kong Qiu's hand where it rested on the table. "This is a rough estimate I made when I got the news—Qidong's expenses for military salaries and provisions. Deploying troops long-distance is more expensive than keeping them stationed in the Bianjun Commandery Garrison like in years past. The

expenses for the grain wagons alone will eat up all the silver taxed from Baimazhou last year.”

Kong Qiu looked at the booklet. “A portion of this silver was spent last year on disaster relief. We’re nearing the beginning of spring. Whether the spring plowing in the eight cities can be carried out without a hitch is a major issue we must consider. If the noble clans aren’t willing to return the commoners’ fields and make up the arrears in land taxes, how can the Grand Secretariat give Marshal Qi an official written reply to her request? No matter how detailed your calculations are, it’s pointless.”

“I do have one idea.” Xue Xiuzhuo looked at Kong Qiu. “The Xue Clan can bear Qidong’s expenses this time.”

Kong Qiu and Cen Yu were stunned; even Liang Cuishan couldn’t believe his ears.

It was commonly known that the Xue Clan of Quancheng had been on the wane since the generation before Xue Xiuzhuo’s. The eldest lawful son, Xue Xiuyi, was a hypocrite; he put up a virtuous and erudite front, but in reality, he’d been swindled by a group of charlatans into incurring debts everywhere. To date, their house had produced only one man, Xue Xiuzhuo himself, who could stand tall in the imperial court. What money could the Xue Clan possibly have?

A thought suddenly occurred to Liang Cuishan. He recalled Shen Zechuan, then Xi Hongxuan.

Kong Qiu was gazing at Xue Xiuzhuo in wary astonishment. “It’s such a large sum. We might not be able to repay it even if I issue a memorandum of debt in my capacity as Grand Secretary.”

“There is no need for a memorandum of debt.” Xue Xiuzhuo refilled Kong Qiu’s cup and said solemnly, “All I ask is the Grand Secretary’s cooperation in the investigation of the eight cities’ field taxes.”

The lanterns outside the relay station swayed as the wind swept leaves and tattered notices from the road. The indistinct music of reed pipes from Donglong Street drifted down the long road before the relay station until it reached the high palace walls, where it disappeared among the eaves. Behind those walls, Li Jianting sat at the edge of her bed and listened to the tinkling of the wind chimes, remembering her past life.

Fengquan was letting down the drapes when he heard the heir apparent ask, “Do you wear earrings?”

Black hair cascading over her shoulders, Li Jianting gazed unseeing into the deep and quiet bedchamber. She went on, as if answering for both Fengquan and herself: “I hate them.”

Her eyes that so resembled the Guangcheng Emperor’s turned toward Fengquan; in the dim light, her lips gradually curved into a smile. “Earrings make a human look like livestock—an animal that lives and dies at the mercy of others.”

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Chapter 214:
Commander

BENEATH THE NOON SUN, under a clear sky, the Duanzhou city gates were a riot of noise. Slush flew from under the horses' hooves. The wheels of wagons transporting provisions skidded between wet stone slabs, dragging the whinnying horses askew and obstructing the path. The Libei Armored Cavalry behind them, unable to enter, had no choice but to dismount and lend a hand.

"This damn weather keeps changing its mind." Yin Chang urgently needed to answer the call of nature. He wrung the belt of his pants, face red from holding it in. "It was cold enough to kill just a few days ago, but now it's so blazing hot it's burning my ass."

Horses cantered along the path, splashing slush over the crowd. Fei Sheng lifted the hem of his robe and tucked it into his belt. Pinching his nose, he groused, "Why do these Biansha ponies stink so bad?!"

"They're used to roaming the desert, shitting wherever they please." Just as Tantai Hu said it, the Biansha pony before him raised its tail to defecate. The steaming dung squelched onto the damp snow. Tantai Hu scraped his boots on the pavers. He wanted to pull his horse away, but before he could move, a few riders sped past from behind, spattering filth all over them.

Fei Sheng jumped backward from the stench. His face had gone green from holding his breath. The moment he saw the fresh manure flying toward them, he dove behind Yin Chang, using the old man as a shield.

“Why the fuck are you in such a rush!” Yin Chang yelled after the Libei cavalrymen who had galloped past. He wiped muck off his face and turned back to snap at Fei Sheng, “And what the fuck’re you hiding for?!”

Meaning to turn around and ride back, Wu Ziyu tugged at the reins. Tantai Hu wasted no time calling, “Motherfucker, get off your horse!”

Wu Ziyu had just changed into a fresh pair of boots; one look at their filthy, muddy figures was enough to deter him from doing any such thing. He slowed to a trot as he approached. “Why is it only you? Where are Er-ye and the governor?”

“They came in earlier.” Breathing through his mouth, Fei Sheng said in a nasal tone, “Why isn’t this snow cleared? The whole road’s obstructed. Look at this filth. My master’s white robe would be ruined if he walked here!”

Wu Ziyu had just fought a victorious battle and was feeling extremely pleased with himself. Despite their foul tempers, he was not at all angry. In fact, he had just been thinking of inviting these men out for drinks. A little smug, he laughed and said, “I’ve been busy!”

He was still laughing when a snowball sailed over the heads of the crowd and smacked him square in the face.

Gu Jin’s sensitive nose couldn’t bear the stench a minute longer. Livid, he had barely finished slinging the snowball before he was shouting, “The fuck are you laughing about?! If this hot weather keeps up, the snow in the city will melt. It won’t be funny when the sewage rotting in these public ditches starts overflowing. The entire city will stink to high heavens.”

Gu Jin was usually a man of few words. Since he’d taken on the heavy responsibility of raising Ding Tao, he rarely cussed; he hadn’t even lost his

temper when Guo Weili humiliated him at Tudalung Banner last year. Yet the stench now was so overwhelming it almost knocked him out even at a distance.

Wu Ziyu was normally attentive and thorough in his work, but his victory had gone to his head. That he had left behind loose ends like this showed success had made him careless. If Chen Yang had been here, he would no doubt have tactfully reminded Wu Ziyu of his duties. But Gu Jin was here instead, and he found shouting at Wu Ziyu to be far more efficient.

The three men standing behind him were gobsmacked. Yin Chang forgot about his bladder and stood shoulder to shoulder with Tantai Hu, waiting for Gu Jin to give the command to get to work on more snowballs.

"Ah, how familiar this curse sounds," Fei Sheng murmured.

"*The fuck*, he said," Tantai Hu hinted.

"Bah." Yin Chang leaned over and denied it. "I didn't teach him that!"

By now, Wu Ziyu had obediently tumbled off his horse.

Duanzhou had never suffered a great fire as Dunzhou had, and its streets looked much the same as they had seven years ago, though most of the shops and restaurants had long since closed. Achi had only kept a few small food stalls around; the Scorpions loved the braised beef here. While the Biansha troops had resided in the city, they'd slaughtered everyone in the residential areas in the east and west. They had, however, retained the night market to the north.

"Lei Jingzhe made his deals with the Scorpions here." Shen Zechuan stepped on the pile of abandoned junk and leaped onto the collapsed

courtyard wall. From atop it, he could just see the night market on the north side. “Shifu used to love to go there. He could buy things you’d never find in the day markets.”

“What’s to the south?” Xiao Chiye strode up and looked. “Ah. Biansha’s horse pastures.”

Shen Zechuan exhaled. “It’s an empty city.”

When Shen Zechuan was in Cizhou and Chazhou the year before, he had worried about the overwhelming number of migrants from Dancheng crowding into those prefectures. But now it seemed that Zhongbo, with its dwindling population, was the perfect place to take in migrants from the eight cities.

“It’s time to reorganize the Yellow Registers.” Xiao Chiye watched Meng soaring across the horizon. The warmth of the sun made him feel lazy. He wasn’t wearing his full armor today, just an armguard. “The registration was managed on a local level by the three prefectures last year. The garrison troops of Chazhou and Dunzhou were lacking in numbers, so the yamen clerks handled everything. Now that all six prefectures are under our control, it’s time to separate the administration of civilian and military registries.”

The civilian registry traditionally fell under the purview of the Ministry of Revenue; it was never intended to be integrated with the military registry. When Xiao Chiye had held the post of the Imperial Army’s supreme commander back in Qudu, the Imperial Army’s office compound had a desk specifically dedicated to the management of the Imperial Army’s military registry. The difference in their makeup was one of the reasons the Imperial Army and the Eight Great Battalions couldn’t stand each other.

It wasn’t easy to be the overlord of Zhongbo. Even in Cizhou, there weren’t enough capable advisors to go around, and the six prefectures would each need their own yamen for civil administration and warden’s offices for military affairs, as well as the corresponding supervisory censors for these respective jurisdictions.

“None of these should pose much of an issue. Yu Xiaozai has the authority to go on an inspection tour of all six prefectures—it’s basically the job of a censor. I actually mean to appoint him the Surveillance Commissioner of Zhongbo. Back in Qudu, his official reviews were excellent. And his work frequently took him outside the capital, so he’s well acquainted with the tricks of provincial yamen. While Chengfeng isn’t willing to give me his sole allegiance, he’ll assist with the administration of the remaining five prefectures, which more or less resolves my most pressing needs.” Shen Zechuan watched Meng’s silhouette grow larger as he winged toward them. “We have no lack of yamen clerks. If the prefectural yamen has work, people will come. What we lack are key officials who can take charge of the administration in each prefecture.”

Not only that. Shen Zechuan lacked generals.

At present, Chazhou’s garrison was managed by Luo Mu. That was fine as a temporary measure, but Shen Zechuan couldn’t let it continue much longer. Luo Mu had too much control at the moment: The governing, military, and supervisory powers were all in his hands. The Embroidered Uniform Guard was temporarily standing in for the left and right censors who would typically fill the supervisory role, but they didn’t have the authority to interfere with the civil administration of Chazhou. If Luo Mu harbored any ulterior motives, he could too easily cover his tracks. To prevent another

situation of this kind, Shen Zechuan had to confirm candidates for the other prefectures as soon as possible.

Xiao Chiye held out his arm for Meng to land. “We lack a treasurer too.”

One man in particular came to mind as soon as Xiao Chiye mentioned this. “A pity we can’t use Liang Cuishan,” Shen Zechuan said.

“Liang Cuishan has real work to do under Pan Lin, so it’s not as if he’s wasting his talents.” Xiao Chiye smoothed Meng’s feathers. “We got the report a few days ago—Xue Xiuzhuo is planning to investigate the farmlands in Dancheng, is he not? If he succeeds, none of the eight cities will escape unscathed. It will be a heavy blow to the noble clans.”

“There’s no definite news yet.” Shen Zechuan leapt lightly down from the wall. “We’ll have to wait for everyone else to arrive to find out the details.”

They walked back along the empty roads. When they arrived before the house where they were lodging, only Fei Sheng was there waiting. Gu Jin and the others were nowhere in sight.

“They went to clear the snow.” Fei Sheng heard how that sounded and quickly added, “It’s Gu Jin and Wu Ziyu’s shift.” What he meant was he wasn’t loafing on the job—he just happened to be taking a break.

Shen Zechuan knew Fei Sheng’s temperament. He let it lie and turned to Xiao Chiye. “The public ditches in Duanzhou have to be reinspected. We don’t know what state they’re in, so we should make plans for repairs as soon as possible.”

Xiao Chiye cast a glance at Fei Sheng but said nothing. Fei Sheng had done a decent job handling the situation with Huo Lingyun. He'd held his temper in check and refrained from attacking him, and even if he obviously couldn't stand the sight of the young man, he hadn't gone around making trouble for him. This, finally, had managed to make an impression on Xiao Chiye.

Fei Sheng didn't dare let these two hover at the entrance. He led the way inside and gestured for the governor to take his seat first. The residence had belonged to the former commander of the Duanzhou Garrison, and was once home to the same Zhu family into which Lei Jingzhe was born. It had fallen into disuse, and Wu Ziyu had tidied it up to receive the two of them after their wearying journey.

The clearing of snow at the city gates continued until evening. These were all men who had just fought a battle, so Shen Zechuan didn't ask them to work overnight. The kitchen had prepared dinner, and everyone took a few bites before falling into bed. Fei Sheng, who was sharing a room with Yin Chang and Tantai Hu, collapsed on the spot as soon as the other two men took off their boots.

Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye had just finished their own meals when Gu Jin, who had been waiting outside, entered the room. Seeing something amiss with Gu Jin's expression, Xiao Chiye set down his leisure reading. "What is it?"

Gu Jin took a letter from his robes and presented it to Xiao Chiye. "A letter for Master from Libei."

Xiao Chiye saw that there were in fact two—one was official business from Xiao Jiming, and the other was a private letter from Chen Yang. He

opened Xiao Jiming's letter first. His brother reminded him that the horses would be delivered to Mount Luo by the end of the second month, at which time Xiao Chiye was due to return to the northern front. None of this was news to Xiao Chiye, but below it was another point of interest worth ruminating over.

When Gu Jin had seen himself out, Shen Zechuan popped his head out from behind Xiao Chiye and set his chin on the crown of Xiao Chiye's head. Lashes lowered, he skimmed the letter, then said placidly, "So, a surprise from Dage."

Xiao Chiye reread those lines a few more times. "He's transferred Guo Weili to my Second Sand Camp. He means to free up Third Sand Camp for Shifu. Guo Weili isn't used to Hassen's rhythm; he would only become aggravated if he remained in the third camp."

Guo Weili was a talented general. The fact that he'd defended Tudalung Banner so long was proof enough of his abilities. But this man had a short fuse and a fiery temper, one he expressed in actions and words alike. He was not an easy man to get along with, and was often unwilling to compromise. At that point, anything that came out of his mouth was belligerent or combative. Since the incident last year in which he had wounded Gu Jin and stripped him of his rank, his relationship with Xiao Chiye had been delicate. And after Xiao Chiye had recovered Third Sand Camp from Huhelu, Guo Weili's soldiers had frequently come to blows with the Imperial Army.

The commanding generals of the three camps were on rotation this year. Both Xiao Chiye and Guo Weili were unaccustomed to leading each other's troops. Every time he took his turn at Second Sand Camp, Guo Weili

mostly left the Imperial Army alone. He found these men slippery and mean, relying on their origins in Qudu to throw their weight around with no respect for their superiors. After the death of Xiao Fangxu, Guo Weili had refrained from making a scene and kept his more acrimonious comments to himself, though he still didn't like Xiao Chiye. But what had happened with Gu Jin remained unresolved, a sharp pebble in both their boots.

This man was a thorny problem.

There was another, deeper meaning behind Xiao Jiming's arrangement as well. All the other camps communicated and worked well with Guo Weili; Zuo Qianqiu, Lu Guangbai, and Zhao Hui never got into disputes with him. Yet Xiao Jiming had purposely transferred him to Xiao Chiye's Second Sand Camp. After a moment of silence, Xiao Chiye said, "As expected of my elder brother."

This arrangement cut straight to the heart of the matter and struck directly on that old bruise.

After his victory in Duanzhou, Xiao Chiye's words would carry much more weight on the Libei front line. Even if he didn't get along with the Libei Armored Cavalry now, they could grow accustomed to each other. No army would reject a commanding general who could lead them to victory. Moreover, not only was Xiao Chiye fair in meting out rewards and punishments, he was also a man of his word. But if he wanted to use the Libei Armored Cavalry to its fullest potential, he had to overcome the obstacle that was Guo Weili. Continued lack of unity among generals was a sure path to disaster.

Shen Zechuan grew sleepy these days whenever he was safe inside. Eyes half-closed, he murmured, "Ce'an, vast is the ocean that welcomes a

hundred rivers.[3] Your brother is giving you an opportunity."

In the dim light, Xiao Chiye recalled a campfire in the snowstorm. The memory of Xiao Fangxu with his fist clenched was right before his eyes. Bathed in the flickering light of the fire, his old man had asked him:

You want this position. But are you truly worthy of it?

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Chapter 215:
Iron Fingers

HASSEN STOOD on the wide open plains and watched a girl leap off a horse. Without even removing his scimitar, he spread his arms and caught that beautiful scarlet figure bounding toward him.

Dorlan gasped softly, her red skirt billowing as Hassen spun her around, her laughter clear and melodious. “May the gods bless my Heroic Eagle!”

Hassen hugged his new bride, blushing, and brushed snow out of her hair. “And may the gods bless my Dorlan.” Hassen had married at the beginning of the year—a union bestowed upon him by Amur as a gift. His beloved Dorlan was a girl from the Hulu tribe deep in the desert. She wore a pleated skirt as red as a jujube and was as beautiful as the morning dew on the shores of Lake Chiti; she was the fieriest filly in the Twelve Tribes, and Hassen was head over heels for her.

Dorlan scrutinized Hassen. “Bayim broke his promise to me. You’ve lost weight.”

Hassen laughed in spite of himself as he set her down. “He can’t always stay by my side.”

“Then he should not have promised.” Dorlan alighted on the ground and took Hassen’s hand. “I brought fresh goat’s milk.”

“It’s too far for you to come all this way.” Hassen’s gaze never left Dorlan as she led him along. “Let Tsagan come alone next time.” Hassen had rested a mere two days after his marriage before returning to the battlefield.

Dorlan hardly ever got to see him; she had taken advantage of a supply run to meet him here. She happily showed Hassen the food she had brought, and Hassen wolfed down the flatbread she'd made.

"I like coming—I want to see you." Dorlan sat on a sack of provisions and watched Hassen eat. "I miss you like the morning dew misses the sun. Will you come home when the snow melts?"

Hassen took a sip of the ice-cold milk and met Dorlan's gaze. Her eyes were a startling green. Each time Hassen looked into them, it was like gazing into the clear, shimmering waters of Lake Chiti. They reminded him of everything that was wonderful, and when she turned them on him as she did now, it was impossible to say no to her. He caressed Dorlan's cheek. "If the war ends."

"You avenged Gegenhas." Gegenhas was Dorlan's elder brother, as well as Hassen's brother-in-arms, whom Xiao Fangxu had killed. "Father is grateful to you—you are truly our hero. You're not only the esuhuri of the Hanma tribe, but also the esuhuri of the Hulu tribe." Dorlan cupped his face. "The heroic eagle shall fly across the Hongyan Mountains. I'll always be waiting for you at Lake Chiti."

Coming from Dorlan's lips, the words *heroic eagle* sounded more like a term of endearment. In the entire desert, only she and Hassen's mother spoke to him like this, and it made his cheeks color.

The wind on the plains was frigid. Hassen finished his milk and brought Dorlan back to the camp. A fire was lit in their tent, and it was here Dorlan steeped milk tea for Hassen. Both were fond of tea, though it was hard to come by.

“If the Huiyan tribe hadn’t defected,” Dorlan said, sipping her milk tea, “we would have a never-ending supply of tea to drink in winter.”

Hassen cut a slice of roast meat for her and wiped his dagger. Adopting a serious expression, he answered, “They will come back.”

Dorlan would be leaving with the supply squad tomorrow, so Hassen didn’t stay overnight with the soldiers. The newlyweds, soon to separate again, retired early.

When snow began to fall in the middle of the night, Hassen was sleeping soundly. A call outside the tent woke him. Moving quietly so as not to wake Dorlan, he draped a robe over his shoulders and stepped out.

Snow blew furiously into Hassen’s face as soon as the tent flap was lifted. Fiery hair loose around his shoulders, he pulled his robe closer and asked the soldier outside, “What’s wrong?”

“Bayim is back!”

Hassen followed his pointing finger and saw what remained of their cavalry.

Bayim had been on the road for days. He slid off his horse and landed on the snow-covered ground with numb legs. Refusing any support, he snatched the waterskin from a soldier beside him and dumped it into his mouth. Only after the front of his robe was drenched and the skin was empty did he appear to have caught his breath.

“What happened?” Hassen picked up Bayim’s scimitar from where it had fallen, then looked at him again. His gaze narrowed, and he said with certainty, “Achi was defeated.”

Bayim rubbed his frozen cheeks and sighed. He looked haggard, a sorry sight with both his legs caked in mud. Tossing the waterskin back to the soldier beside him, he said, “Xiao Chiye lured us across the frozen river to the Chashi Sinkhole. He killed Achi there.”

He tugged hard at the left side of his saddle. Achi’s head tumbled out and dropped at Hassen’s feet, facedown.

“Xiao Chiye let me go.” Bayim’s voice trembled, his lips blue with cold. “He told me to bring this back.”

Hassen pressed his lips into a grim line—the first sign of his looming fury. He looked at Achi’s head, and fire blazed in his eyes. There was dead silence all around; only the gale howled in their ears. The frigid air Hassen inhaled seemed to race through his limbs. He turned and looked into the distance, where snowflakes danced madly in the air.

“Duanzhou has been overtaken by wolves,” Bayim said. “They’ve joined hands with a fox from Zhongbo. Haerigu is there too—he’s become Xiao Chiye’s slave.” His throat bobbed as he recalled the terror of being pursued by the Libei Armored Cavalry. “Xiao Chiye has gotten his hands on a new saber, and under it, the Scorpions have become weeds in the desert. Hassen, our hammers can’t hold him back. That’s not Xiao Fangxu’s armored cavalry anymore.”

“It hasn’t been Xiao Fangxu’s armored cavalry for a long time.” Hassen abruptly turned and took a step closer to Bayim. “The wolves need a new leader—a new king of wolves. Xiao Jiming will call him back to the north, and I will be there waiting for him and his new blade.”

A rustle sounded behind him. Dorlan stood at the entrance of the tent, watching them with brows knit. Hassen swallowed his fury and turned to

look at her, but did not smile.

He should have killed Xiao Chiye. Hassen thought so often; now, in the snow, he was reminded once again.

He should have killed Xiao Chiye during that hunt in the autumn rain.

Deep in the night, silence lay over the courtyard.

Xiao Chiye had finished washing and was picking through a small box full of pearls and gems by candlelight. Shen Zechuan's folding fan lay on the table; its owner was still soaking in the bath.

"The horses will arrive at Mount Luo in a few days." Xiao Chiye picked up the red agate he had left inside yesterday and called to Shen Zechuan through the screen, "Will you go with me for a look?"

The past few days had exhausted Shen Zechuan. Although he hadn't fallen sick, he also hadn't touched Avalanche once. Sinking deeper in the water, he said, "I'll come. It's also more convenient for you to return to Libei from there."

Time was passing too quickly; Shen Zechuan had merely met with a few people here in Duanzhou to speak of all that needed doing, yet it was already the end of the second month. Tilting his head back, he closed his eyes in contemplation. The arch of his neck was beautiful under the dim light filtering through the screen, smooth and luminous.

Xiao Chiye turned the agate bead in his fingers. "Have you decided on a candidate for Duanzhou's leadership?"

"Yes. A rising talent."

Xiao Chiye glanced over. "Kong Chengfeng?"

Shen Zechuan raised one dripping hand and propped his cheek against it. He cast a sidelong glance at Xiao Chiye's silhouette. "Nope—guess again."

"Yuanzhuo can't get around easily, so he's not suitable either." Xiao Chiye genuinely couldn't come up with another name. "Who else could there be?"

Shen Zechuan climbed out of the water and wiped himself dry with a nearby towel. Out of sight of Xiao Chiye, he brought the freshly washed blue handkerchief to his nose and sniffed it lightly before answering, "Shen Lanzhou, of course."

The thickest wall defending Zhongbo would be built in Duanzhou. And now that Libei had a presence on Mount Luo, Shen Zechuan didn't trust anyone else with this job. He had to stay and build this wall with his own hands. Besides, from Duanzhou, one could ride directly south and bypass Tianfei Watchtower to arrive at the Bianjun Commandery. Shen Zechuan found this location ideal. Establishing a reserve depot here like the one in Cizhou would allow him to supply both the northern and southern fronts.

"Do you remember what you said about the steel needle?" Shen Zechuan replaced the handkerchief on the table, his fingertips lingering as though reluctant to part with it. "Qiao Tianya is the most suitable candidate to lead them, but he's taking care of Yuanzhuo now; he's unable to leave Cizhou. If I appoint Fei Sheng instead, this place is too far away for me to feel comfortable leaving him here without anyone to check him."

This so-called steel needle was the light cavalry Shen Zechuan had dreamed of, one that could be deployed along the banks of the Chashi River as Shen Zechuan's eyes and ears, and make its home in Duanzhou, the central

hub of the northern and southern frontiers. The leader of such a force in a place like this would become a key official overseeing both civil and military affairs. On top of that, once trade from the Yan Clan made its way here after spring, money would flow freely in and out of the city—and Yan Heru was far from an honest man.

Shen Zechuan couldn't find any particular fault with Fei Sheng, but he questioned how long Fei Sheng's loyalty would endure. He couldn't gamble it all based only on their current master-servant relationship. Perhaps he would be fine for a year or two. But once Fei Sheng was stationed here a while and got a taste of the benefits that came with the position, with Shen Zechuan's steel needle in his hands and Yan Heru on the sidelines buttering him up, how much of today's sentiment, developed in the course of their shared tribulations, would remain? At that point, Shen Zechuan would no longer be the only thing Fei Sheng had to fall back on. A single wayward thought would spell danger.

Power was something that could not be bestowed on its own—Qi Huilian had warned Shen Zechuan about this long ago. The cornerstone of governance was checks and balances. Leading a group of outstanding men meant gazing down at the whole field from a bird's eye view. One should never let personal bias dictate one's actions.

He had placed Huo Lingyun in the Embroidered Uniform Guard precisely to fill the role vacated by Qiao Tianya. This new young man posed a threat to Fei Sheng; his presence would force Fei Sheng to tread carefully. Yao Wenyu, thinking along the same lines, had suggested this as a means to push Qiao Tianya back into the game. He was reminding Shen Zechuan, who was shorthanded, that Qiao Tianya was indispensable. If Fei Sheng wished to

advance, Shen Zechuan would have to maintain this careful balance. Every time Fei Sheng rose up the ranks, Qiao Tianya should also be discreetly promoted in the same manner. He was the chain that held Fei Sheng in check; Shen Zechuan could never allow Fei Sheng to surpass Qiao Tianya and stand on his own.

Fei Sheng had once told Qiao Tianya that in Shen Zechuan's eyes, Qiao Tianya was the most suitable man to command the light cavalry in Duanzhou. These two understood each other well. Qiao Tianya was a sentimental man who valued relationships; this was his strength, but also his weakness.

Shen Zechuan slipped into his robe and stepped out from behind the screen.

Xiao Chiye sat at the edge of the desk with his long legs stretched out in front of him. Hearing the soft pad of footsteps, he hid the round agate bead in his fist and looked at Shen Zechuan. "In that case, I have something to tell you."

Shen Zechuan's belt was loosely tied, his robe open to expose his collarbones. When he stepped onto the rug, it tickled the soles of his feet. He sipped his tea and nodded for Xiao Chiye to go on.

"I'm sending the Biansha ponies we seized to Mount Luo as well. You want a light cavalry, so you should give them a try. They're swifter than the battle steeds of Libei, and they have great endurance and stamina in the desert."

Shen Zechuan held the teacup in both hands and thought for a moment.

"Libei can't use these ponies anyway. Our horses are born and bred at the foot of the Hongyan Mountains specifically for the armored cavalry; it

took generations to produce mounts that can bear the weight of heavy armor.” Xiao Chiye spread his legs wider to make space for Shen Zechuan to stand between them. Propping himself up on one arm, he watched Shen Zechuan sink into thought.

“Let Fei Sheng take a look at the Biansha ponies before we leave,” Shen Zechuan said. “We can use the riding track Achi left.”

“That’s my riding track.” Xiao Chiye took Shen Zechuan’s chin between his fingers and pulled him closer. “When will you give me Shen Lanzhou?”

Under the force of this grip, Shen Zechuan remembered Xiao Chiye’s iron-clad fingers from the other day, as well as the cool, solid touch of metal caressing his nape. His breathing hitched; he wanted to avert his gaze, but Xiao Chiye was holding him in place. It was hot inside the room, and tiny beads of sweat began to materialize on the temples of the freshly bathed prefectural governor.

Staring at Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye leaned in. “It turned you on when I touched you that day, didn’t it, Your Lordship?”

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Chapter 216:
Torrid Night

THE ADDRESS of *Your Lordship* for the prefectural governor was used by all. Yet this phrase, coming from Xiao Chiye's mouth, took on a note of scandalous thrill, as if they were hiding secret codes in plain sight, the words hinting at an unmentionable intimacy. Desire surged through them like a tide, spreading and flowing where their bodies touched and drawing out a thin layer of sweat.

During the day, the prefectural governor sat apart and gazed down on everyone. His folding fan obscured his expressions, revealing only the cold indifference in his eyes. A single sharp look set off alarm bells, warning anyone smart enough to see the danger. But right now, his lips were lightly parted as he bit down on the finger Xiao Chiye had pushed into his mouth. That soft tongue, that glistening spit, that hot shame he silently endured—all of it seemed to cry: *Defile me*.

Xiao Chiye wanted him.

He wanted not only his fair neck, but also this slippery tongue.

He ran a calloused finger over Shen Zechuan's gums. Shen Zechuan had just finished a cup of hot tea, and the inside of his mouth was sensitive. His eyes misted with tears; with Xiao Chiye's fingers in his mouth, he became so incoherent he couldn't give any answer to the question Xiao Chiye had asked. Saliva ran from the corner of Shen Zechuan's mouth as the tip of his tongue probed Xiao Chiye's fingers.

Eventually, they knelt facing the wall, Shen Zechuan leaning forward to escape the smothering compression of Xiao Chiye's chest at his back. This position made him feel as though every thrust sank all the way to the hilt. He braced his palms against the wall, resting his forehead against it as his tears flowed in earnest. But when he lowered his head, he exposed the nape of his neck, and Xiao Chiye set his teeth to it. His loose robe crumpled beneath them.

Kneeling like this, he left everything in Xiao Chiye's hands.

The tip of Xiao Chiye's nose nuzzled feather-light along Shen Zechuan's nape—like supplication, but also like coercion. His ravenous gaze lingered on Shen Zechuan's profile, where he saw the seductive temptation within the sloping corners of Shen Zechuan's tearful eyes.

Shen Zechuan had no idea what danger the corners of his eyes were courting. Surely he wasn't to blame, for even as Xiao Chiye sank his teeth in, Shen Zechuan's moans were exceedingly soft. But Xiao Chiye was no less ferocious for this; he set Shen Zechuan's body adrift amid the raging waves. Xiao Chiye's desperation crashed over Shen Zechuan, permitting him no space to struggle as the tempestuous sounds of their movements filled the room.

Seeing Shen Zechuan's tears falling like beads, Xiao Chiye leaned in to drop a kiss on the corner of one eye. Shen Zechuan sobbed harder at that kiss, his tears wetting the wrecked robe beneath them. He turned his gaze toward Xiao Chiye, his voice trembling. "It's all, all—ah! Your fault…"

Xiao Chiye bit down on the shell of Shen Zechuan's ear and whispered through his mouthful, "Mm, my fault."

His next thrust went so deep it left Shen Zechuan too breathless to make any sound at all.

Shen Zechuan was drenched after taking Xiao Chiye for several rounds, and so was his robe. Xiao Chiye pinned him to the rug, face down, and dipped to kiss him. Too exhausted to raise his head, Shen Zechuan lazily stuck out his tongue. Xiao Chiye took it into his mouth and sucked on it, pressing Shen Zechuan down into the rug. The rug in this room was unlike the one in Cizhou; rather than soft pile, it resembled a soft brush with fine bristles. Xiao Chiye tore away Shen Zechuan's soaked robe, and the friction as the front of Shen Zechuan's bare body moved against the rug proved too much for him to bear.

"No!" Shen Zechuan pled for mercy between his sobs. "Xiao Er, I can't __"

Holding him down, Xiao Chiye captured that soft tongue again so that all Shen Zechuan could do was cry.

But how could Shen Zechuan withstand an onslaught like this? The chafing of the rug left his hips and legs limp, while the assault from behind remained breathtakingly intense. He was entirely consumed by Xiao Chiye; between each ragged, hectic breath, he couldn't get a clear word out. His face flushed red, and he made for a sorry sight as he murmured haltingly, "Turn, turn over—Ce'an!"

"Hush." Xiao Chiye pinned down Shen Zechuan's scrabbling hands. His entire chest pressed him flush to the fine fur of the rug. "My wife'll be back any minute."

Why's he still going on about this?!

Cheek partially buried, Shen Zechuan whimpered, “Y-you—*mn*!”

Xiao Chiye pressed the tip of his nose to Shen Zechuan’s soaked temple, the sound of his rapid breathing lingering in his ear. The candle had long since gone out. The bright snow outside reflected onto the window paper, while the branches of the trees, weighed down by the snow, hung low. Shen Zechuan rubbed against the rug until it was sodden with sweat and tears, the heat and friction of the fur making him perspire even more.

Xiao Chiye was almost there. Grasping Shen Zechuan’s hand in his own, he again buried his teeth in his neck. Veiled words, dim light, humid desperation, the intensity of their bodies entwined; Xiao Chiye always had a way of making Shen Zechuan cry.

“I—” Tears in his eyes, Shen Zechuan said with venom, “I’m going to t-tell your wife! Y-you—!”

“Sure.” Xiao Chiye let loose a muffled laugh. “Go ahead and tell him. Tell him you get wet at the very sight of me.”

Shen Zechuan couldn’t hold out any longer. Xiao Chiye was driving into him so hard it was making him tremble. Shen Zechuan clutched at the rug with white fingertips, nearing his climax.

The snow on the branch outside shook and fell, followed by a few caws of a night-flying crow. Xiao Chiye grasped Shen Zechuan’s jaw and kissed him hard, and Shen Zechuan came apart completely, spilling his release over the rug.

The next few days were bright and sunny. Spring set the air sparkling as the third month approached, and the snow began to melt in Duanzhou. Gu

Jin and Wu Ziyu cleared the roads and reported on the public ditches that ought to be repaired.

As Shen Zechuan was needed in Duanzhou for the foreseeable future, Yao Wenyu left Cizhou and came to him. His mobility was limited, so the carriage traveled slowly on the way over. Kong Ling and Yu Xiaozai met him in Dunzhou, and all three arrived together.

Fei Sheng received them outside the city gates. After escorting the gentlemen inside, he followed Qiao Tianya back out to take an inventory of the supplies they had brought from Cizhou. When he saw Huo Lingyun had come too, he whispered to Qiao Tianya, “What’s he doing here?”

“Once he puts on his authority token, he’s a member of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.” Qiao Tianya took a few long strides and hopped onto the wagon. “Should I not have brought him?”

Huo Lingyun seemed to sense them looking. He turned, meeting each of their eyes.

“That man is dangerous.” Fei Sheng averted his gaze. “Duanzhou isn’t like Cizhou. Who’s going to take responsibility if he pulls something?”

“I will.” Qiao Tianya squatted and fished out his pipe. He lit it, then cast a glance at Fei Sheng. “Don’t be too smart for your own good, trying to play mind games with our master.”

Fei Sheng was none too pleased. “Ever since he joined us, have I ever once raised a fuss? What are you implying?”

“Why are you so angry?” Qiao Tianya puffed on his pipe. “I’m simply leveling with you. By making such a point of shunning him, aren’t you just

setting the stage for Master to take more personal notice of him? At that point, he'll no longer be under your charge."

Shen Zechuan had retained Huo Lingyun rather than kill him precisely because he wanted to put him to use. If Fei Sheng kept Huo Lingyun idle indefinitely, then, just as Qiao Tianya said, once Shen Zechuan grew impatient, he would shuffle the board, and Huo Lingyun would no longer answer to Fei Sheng.

Fei Sheng flicked another glance at Huo Lingyun.

"You followed Master out of Qudu," Qiao Tianya said, "while he's brand new. He doesn't have the same bond with Master, or with the Embroidered Uniform Guard. What the hell are you so scared of? You've got him beat with that silver tongue of yours alone."

"Hey, that's offensive." Fei Sheng looked away and thought for a moment. "That guy is both devious and capable. If he stays in Duanzhou, it's only a matter of time before he makes a name for himself."

Shen Zechuan would remain in Duanzhou to establish the light cavalry. The position of this force's commander was not one that could be secured with merely a silver tongue. Fei Sheng had been certain he would be the one in charge here—but that was before Shen Zechuan called Yao Wenyu east, and with him, Qiao Tianya.

"You're capable too," Qiao Tianya said. "But if you dwell on this, you'll only be holding yourself back. Is there anything that escapes Master's eyes? What's meant to be yours will be yours."

Ready to end this conversation, Fei Sheng changed the subject. "Why did you start smoking again?"

“I’ve nothing better to do.” Qiao Tianya put the pipe out and fell silent.

Shen Zechuan turned his folding fan over and tapped it gently on the table. He had just changed out his earring. The red of the new agate bead accentuated the fairness of his complexion, but it was so conspicuous that the men around him dared not look too long.

“I’ve transcribed a copy of Luo Mu’s account book.” Yu Xiaozai presented it to Shen Zechuan. “Please look it over, Your Lordship.”

Shen Zechuan flipped through the pages. “The spring plowing is just around the corner. Pick someone suitable to go to Chazhou and assist Luo Mu in his administrative duties. He’s only one man, after all; we can’t put too great a burden on him.”

What he meant, of course, was that it was time to break Luo Mu’s monopoly on power in Chazhou. They should select someone who could keep him in check.

“I do have a candidate in mind,” Kong Ling put in. “When I went down to Dengzhou on Your Lordship’s orders, I encountered an old acquaintance of Er-ye.”

“An old acquaintance of Ce’an?” Shen Zechuan closed the book and thought for a moment, but no one came to mind. What acquaintance did Xiao Chiye have in Dengzhou?

“Does Your Lordship remember Wang Xian?” Kong Ling asked. “He was once the Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue in Qudu. He managed the Imperial Army’s expenditures during the eighth year of Xiande.”

At last Shen Zechuan remembered.

In fact, this Wang Xian had been involved in the incident with the Quancheng silk. He had been on bad terms with Xiao Chiye then. During the assassination case, he had been framed for bribing Xiao Chiye, and thus been demoted and sent away from the capital. Before Wang Xian left, Xiao Chiye had gone to the Ministry of Revenue to pull a few strings so that Wang Xian wouldn't lose his official position completely, but was merely sent out to Zhongbo.

Even Xiao Chiye himself had forgotten all about this, never mind Shen Zechuan.

Not long after Wang Xian had arrived in Dengzhou, however, bandits had attacked the local government compound. He'd fled the yamen in disguise only to be stranded among the migrants there. It wasn't until Kong Ling went to inspect the yamen after Yang Qiu's death that Wang Xian emerged from hiding.

"According to Er-ye, this man was originally meant to come to Cizhou. But with everything that happened in Qudu," Kong Ling said tactfully, "the Ministry of Revenue sent him to Dengzhou instead. He suffered quite a bit there, but when I spoke to him, the kindness Your Lordship and Er-ye showed him was still on his mind."

Shen Zechuan thought about this carefully. "If he's willing, place him in Chazhou. His original position was within the Ministry of Revenue, so he should be no stranger to assisting with taxation."

This was perfect. Shen Zechuan didn't trust Luo Mu, so putting Wang Xian, a proficient tax administrator, in Chazhou would allow him to keep a close eye on Luo Mu's account books. Since the most pressing concern there

was money, as long as they kept a tight hold on the flow of cash, Luo Mu wouldn't have the means to cause trouble.

It was still early, so after settling the matter of Chazhou, Shen Zechuan set aside the less pressing affairs of the three prefectures and turned to Yao Wenyu. "How are you getting on these days?"

Yao Wenyu adjusted the plush blanket covering his knees. "Thank you for Your Lordship's concern. I've been fine."

"Although there's a road connecting Cizhou to Duanzhou, it's still a long journey. I worried you'd catch a cold on the way; my mind is considerably more at ease now seeing you."

Yao Wenyu waited for Shen Zechuan to finish these pleasantries, then said, "Actually, I brought news from Cizhou for Your Lordship." After a moment's pause, he continued, "There was a rumor in Dancheng a few days ago. They say Pan Lin and Pan Yi have been dismissed from their posts and handed over to the Court of Judicial Review and the Ministry of Justice to await prosecution."

Shen Zechuan's eyes flitted up to meet Yao Wenyu's. "So soon?"

Three members of the Pan Clan of Dancheng—Pan Xiangjie, Pan Lin, and Pan Yi—were major ministers at court. What was more, they were recently connected to the Fei Clan of Chuancheng through marriage. They wielded considerable influence among what remained of the noble clans. If the empress dowager wished to retain her hold on power, she must have the Pan Clan's full dedication to her cause. Pan Lin's dismissal as Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue would be an enormous loss for the empress dowager.

“The moment Liang Cuishan and Xue Xiuzhuo arrived in Dancheng, they set about auditing the records of farmlands,” Yao Wenyu said. “They didn’t refer to the original records Pan Yi submitted, but assigned someone to go out and personally survey the land.”

Pan Yi had thought that with Pan Xiangjie and the Helian Marquis as guarantors—and with the assistance of Liang Cuishan, who owed Pan Lin a debt of gratitude—they would pass the audits, or at the very least manage to delay until the end of spring. They hadn’t expected that Liang Cuishan would be there of his own volition to do a proper audit.

“In the meantime,” Kong Ling said, picking up the story, “someone submitted a memorial impeaching Xue Xiuzhuo and demanding the Xue Clan’s city of Quancheng’s accounts be checked first. Kong Qiu overruled it.”

Shen Zechuan’s fan paused in its tapping. His brows slowly drew together in a frown. “It’s not been a year since the riots at the Imperial College. Kong Qiu and Cen Yu were both publicly denounced in essays back then; they were at daggers drawn with Xue Xiuzhuo, how are they so quickly…”

“There’s more,” said Yao Wenyu. “The grain levies intendant of Juexi has been imprisoned over something to do with the Chuancheng accounts—border tariffs, they’re saying. The Chief Surveillance Bureau is impeaching him now. Even the Hua Clan’s Dicheng is feeling the repercussions.” Yao Wenyu, having been born of a noble clan, had more insight than the others regarding the thread connecting these incidents. “The grain levies intendant of Juexi technically ought to have nothing to do with the Helian Marquis’s

Chuancheng, but the Chief Surveillance Bureau impeached them in the same breath."

"The Helian Marquis of Chuancheng has close ties to the Hua Clan," Shen Zechuan said. "But on the surface, he doesn't concern himself with the Chuancheng accounts. If Cen Yu is impeaching even the Helian Marquis, they must have leverage against him." He caressed the edge of his fan with his fingertips and thought it over. "Something's not right about this. Where's Yan Heru? Call him over."

There must be some reason Kong Qiu was suddenly willing to bury the hatchet with Xue Xiuzhuo. Shen Zechuan's sight was obstructed by the walls that ringed Qudu, yet he had to know what Qudu was doing at all times. If Pan Lin truly fell from grace over this, then not only would the noble clans suffer a setback, the empress dowager would be left isolated in the struggle for power in the capital.

The instant Yan Heru's butt touched the bench, he began rambling. "Oh man, these last few days have been sucking the life out of me! Your Lordship, if you hadn't called for me, that Wu Ziyu would never have let me set a foot outside. Qidong's military provisions haven't been fully delivered yet. I was so anxious, and you know my temper—I was about ready to explode! This city is so run-down. Can I have a cushion or something? This seat's killing my…ass…"

Yan Heru's voice trailed off under Shen Zechuan's hard gaze. He shifted uneasily.

"It's bribery, of course," Yan Heru continued in a small voice. "What leverage could the Helian Marquis have but money? He's a marquis with a sinecure; he's got practically no obligations. To smooth the way for his son's

future, he goes all over the city giving gifts. That Liang Cuishan is in Dancheng now, no? The Helian Marquis must be out of his mind. He asked the grain levies intendant of Juexi to gift Liang Cuishan a bag of gold. Isn't that playing right into the enemy's hands? Even I know Liang Cuishan isn't an easy man to bribe—he's cut from the same cloth as Jiang Qingshan. Now look what happened. One little bag of gold from the Helian Marquis screwed over their whole little clique!"

"Bribery?" Yao Wenyu echoed, looking over at Shen Zechuan. "Pan Lin would only have assigned Liang Cuishan to the case because he trusted him. Why would the Helian Marquis make the redundant move of bribing him with gold?"

"He's stupid, duh." Tapping his teacup lid, Yan Heru recalled how Fei Sheng had pressed his head down before. Remembering this grudge, he added, "The men of the Fei Clan are all fools; not much brain in those heads. The young marquis, Fei Shi, is of marrying age, yet he's still a layabout. Obviously, their entire house is incapable of doing anything right."

"The Helian Marquis is on the empress dowager's side. He didn't topple even when Hua Siqian fell from power." Shen Zechuan's gaze sharpened. "Even if he wants to influence Liang Cuishan, he shouldn't have sent him gold. And to think he sent it through the grain levies intendant of Juexi—he might as well have written his name on it. Why would he do such a thing?"

"Who knows?" But Yan Heru suddenly drew himself up in his seat as something occurred to him. He leaned across the table with an expression of astonishment. "Ah—but what a tragedy for the Helian Marquis if he wasn't the one who dangled that bribe after all! If this was a frame-up, then Xue

Xiuzhuo managed to deal a direct blow to his clan and drag the Pan Clan into hot water at the same time!”

In a flash, Shen Zechuan put the pieces together. The fan smacked down on the tabletop with a crisp *thwack*, startling Yan Heru so badly he jumped in his seat.

Yao Wenyu broke into a coughing fit. He clutched his handkerchief to his mouth; still slightly hunched in his chair, he recovered enough to say, “A brilliant scheme. Well played, Xue Yanqing!”

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Chapter 217:
Hewei

QUDU HAD BEEN damp all day with rain and snow, accompanied by a chill that cut to one's bones. The Helian Marquis had been kneeling in the hall so long his legs were numb and his sleeves were soaked through with his tears.

"That Xue Yanqing is shameless and unscrupulous! He would stop at nothing to frame me. How can it be that a Juexi grain levies intendant's act of bribery implicates our Chuancheng? Juexi is Jiang Qingshan's territory; with a little digging, it should be obvious that Jiang Qingshan is the one behind it!" The Helian Marquis's official's hat sat on the ground by his knees. "And then there's Cen Xunyi," he said between sobs. "His relentless targeting makes it clear he's trying to dispose of anyone who stands against him—he's colluding with Xue Yanqing to trap me. These men shamelessly engage in shady deals to benefit themselves, yet Kong Boran still tolerates and abets them. They are destroying the order of the imperial court!"

"What nonsense!" The empress dowager was in a towering rage. "If you really had nothing to hide, would Xue Xiuzhuo have found all these problems in your accounts? The grain levies intendant of Juexi has embezzled his fair share of silver in Chuancheng. How could he have done it without your support?!"

Despite the gloom outside, it was as bright as day in the hall. All the palace maids and eunuchs had retreated to the courtyard, leaving only Aunt Liuxiang kneeling in attendance. The Helian Marquis, having come to repent,

was dressed in thin and modest layers. He trembled with fear under the wrath of the empress dowager.

Since the death of the Tianchen Emperor, the empress dowager had been covering up the noble clans' failings from her position behind the beaded curtain. She was exhausted. She sighed in disappointment at the Helian Marquis.

Sensing that her mood boded ill, the Helian Marquis shuffled forward on his knees. "Your Majesty, please be appeased. The wisest strategy now is to sacrifice the pawn to save the rook. We must preserve Pan Lin first and foremost."

Pan Lin was Pan Xiangjie's lawful son and the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue. They'd lost Wei Huaigu the previous year, leaving only Pan Lin with a foothold in this key ministry. If Pan Lin fell now, the noble clans would have no hold on the state treasury.

"Even if we can save Pan Lin's neck, we can't save Pan Yi," the empress dowager said.

Pan Yi was the husband of Commandery Princess Zhaoyue. If Pan Yi was executed, Zhaoyue would be widowed. Choked with grief, the Helian Marquis bent over and wept. Wiping his tears, he said, "As a father, how could I bear to cast aside such a fine son-in-law if the situation were not so desperate? But what choice do I have? I would rather see her a widow than implicated in this."

The empress dowager's expression was troubled behind the beaded curtain. At last, she said only, "Go home. Tell Zhaoyue and Pan Yi to agree to a divorce."

Wet snow drummed against the palace eaves, blanketing the tops of the vermilion walls in white. The mournful toll of the bell in the ancient watchtower drifted into the hall where the joint hearing was being held. Pan Lin sat within. As a ranked official, he wasn't required to kneel in obeisance to the judges presiding in the hall. But after days of interrogation, Xue Xiuzhuo was the only one sitting before him now.

"After the reign of Yongyi, Dancheng no longer received farmland as rewards, yet the survey conducted by the Ministry of Revenue presented a drastically different picture than what was reported to the court." Xue Xiuzhuo sat straight-backed in his chair and gazed at Pan Lin. "In his role as the prefect of Dancheng, Pan Yi concealed additional fields from the Ministry of Revenue's audits. As for you, you have the important duty of presiding over taxation in the Ministry of Revenue, yet in all these years of auditing the field taxes, you never once raised any concerns. I ask you this: Were you aware that Dancheng was falsifying the accounts for its field taxes?"

Pan Lin had been locked up for the last few days, and his official's robe was wrinkled as he sat across the table and gazed at Xue Xiuzhuo without a word.

Xue Xiuzhuo gazed back at Pan Lin without blinking.

Pan Lin was not an easy man to intimidate. These high-ranking imperial court officials were all familiar with how such investigations went. Those who were smart would maintain their silence when questioned by the Court of Judicial Review and Ministry of Justice. The presiding officials were all proficient in the art of interrogation. Any attempt at verbal sparring only made it easier to slip and give them leverage. Pan Lin was a smart man, and he kept his silence in the face of all of Xue Xiuzhuo's questions.

If the case reached an impasse here, it would give the remaining seven cities time to clean up their accounts and dispose of all evidence of their sordid deeds before Xue Xiuzhuo turned the investigation on them. Xue Xiuzhuo had lain in wait for many years, biding his time, before this opportunity came along. He couldn't let Pan Lin slip from his grasp.

"Pan Xiangjie's position remains untouched." Xue Xiuzhuo laced his fingers together. "Her Majesty has commended him as a great supporting minister who assists in the governance of the state. He is expected to be transferred out of the Ministry of Works after this spring's imperial examinations—a hint that he will be promoted into the Grand Secretariat. Drag things out with me here, and his annual review after spring is bound to be affected."

Pan Lin leaned over and spit onto the floor. "You manipulated the grain levies intendant into offering bribes and took that chance to make an ally of Kong Qiu. You're trying to knock my house down because I let Yao Yuanzhuo go. You're just a sadistic, low-born son of a concubine. Don't act like you're some great pillar of the state!"

Xue Xiuzhuo's expression remained unchanged. "Before Pan Xiangjie took up his post as the Minister of Works, your clan was already gobbling up the common folks' fields in Dancheng. During the reign of Yongyi, Cao Cheng, a commoner of Dancheng, entered the capital to lodge a complaint. He was trampled to death by Hua Shisan's horse on Shenwu Street, and his eighty-year-old father killed himself by slamming his head into the entrance of the Dancheng yamen. You're right. I *am* going after you because of Yao Wenyu. But Yao Wenyu was merely an opportunity you handed me. Even without him, the Pan Clan still must pay their dues."

Pan Lin’s limbs were ice-cold. He leaned back in his chair and avoided Xue Xiuzhuo’s gaze.

“During the reign of Xiande, Secretariat Elder Hai received an imperial edict to audit Dancheng’s field taxes,” Xue Xiuzhuo said. “The man assigned to the case was named Jiang Jun, a fellow official of mine during my time as the Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue. There were already signs of malfeasance back then. Jiang Jun fell from his horse and died on his way back to the capital to submit his report. The account book he had on him vanished into thin air.

“In the second year of Xiande, when the secretariat elder was digging into the accounts, Hua Siqian was concerned he had real evidence of wrongdoing. He ordered the noble clans to make up for the deficit in taxes. You people were unwilling to cough up the money from your own private coffers, so you encroached on even more land in the eight cities in order to make up the required sum. That same year, seven households in Dancheng consumed poison and committed suicide. You must know why, right?”

Of course Pan Lin knew.

That year, Hai Liangyi’s investigations had pushed Hua Siqian into such a corner that even Pan Xiangjie grew anxious. He appropriated even more of the commoners’ fields, yet ordered the fields taxes split between the commoners in the city. The common folk had lost the fields that were the source of their income only to be burdened with hefty additional taxes. Unable to obtain redress for this gross injustice—though not for lack of trying—they could only seek death.

This phenomenon was not exclusive to Dancheng. It had been a common plight in the eight cities since the reign of Xiande.

Xue Xiuzhuo continued, “Later, Juexi was hit with disaster, and Jiang Qingshan—do you know why Jiang Qingshan refused to be persuaded by Hua Siqian? Jiang Jun was his cousin. There is such a thing as karmic retribution.”

Pan Lin’s throat constricted, but he forced a laugh. “Then aren’t you afraid you’ll suffer retribution for framing the innocent now?”

“Innocent? Is the grain levies intendant of Juexi innocent? He got the position because you people vouched for him. The Ministry of Revenue gave him a favorable appraisal and placed him in Juexi to counterbalance Jiang Qingshan. While in his position, he colluded with the Yan Clan of Hezhou, reselling copper and iron on behalf of the cities of Chuancheng and Dicheng. The tariffs he extorted are enough to rebuild the entirety of the office compound we’re sitting in.” Xue Xiuzhuo rose to his feet. His official’s robe appeared dark and heavy in the dim light of the hall. “If the grain levies intendant really had no connection to the Helian Marquis, would he have so willingly taken the hint and hurried over to offer a bribe? You called this a frame-up, but it’s an old tactic all of you have used in the past. I’m only following your example.”

Pan Lin swallowed hard. Anxiety had started to burn in him. “You go to great lengths to support the heir apparent’s ascent to the throne, but I fear it will all be for naught in the end.”

“My heir’s name is Li Jianting, not Li Jianheng.” Xue Xiuzhuo braced his hands on the table and looked down at Pan Lin. Abruptly, he asked, “What do you know about the Scorpions?”

The expression on Pan Lin’s face was blank. He remained silent, refusing to fall into Xue Xiuzhuo’s trap again.

“Zhongbo’s defeat in the fourth year of Xiande gave Hua Siqian a chance to catch his breath. Whether it was Shen Wei fleeing from battle or the surprising force of the Biansha invasion, it seemed heaven extended a helping hand to the noble clans that year,” Xue Xiuzhuo said. “But you know what? I don’t believe in that stuff.”

Pan Lin had no idea what Xue Xiuzhuo was talking about, but he scented danger. He could remain tight-lipped when it came to accusations of appropriating commoners’ fields, but treason was a different matter. If something like this gained traction, it could spell his doom.

“You’re trying to frame me again!” Pan Lin snapped. “You ingratiate yourself with the heir apparent for power and position, yet you dispose of those who challenge you in the imperial court and bend the law to suit yourself! If you truly have the state’s interest at heart, how could you force Lu Guangbai into rebellion?”

“And who was it that tampered with the Bianjun Commandery’s grain?” Xue Xiuzhuo flung away the statement in his hand. “Who was it that embezzled nearly half of Qidong’s military provisions? You people repeatedly held Qi Zhuyin back while allowing Libei to grow unchecked, until their one-hundred-twenty-thousand armored cavalrymen overran the northeast. Without Xiao Chiye in Qudu, what else could have kept Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming tethered so long? Why don’t you ask yourself how the secretariat elder has been cleaning up your messes all these years?! The empress dowager has seized control of the court, yet even now, she is unwilling to compromise the interests of the noble clans to make up for the shortfall in Qidong’s military funds!”

Xue Xiuzhuo's chest heaved. He turned aside and spoke again in a calmer voice. "I'm indeed disposing of all those who stand against me." He looked at Pan Lin once again. "I plan to pull up you parasites by the roots—along with those Scorpions."

Yao Wenyu had caught a chill from his long-distance journey; he fell sick on his first night in Duanzhou. Yuanzhuo's health was fragile, and even the most minor cold could quickly devolve into serious illness. Shen Zechuan sent the physician to remain on standby in the courtyard.

Xiao Chiye was finishing their meal as Shen Zechuan rose and prepared to look in on him. "Wait—let's go together. I'll pay him a visit too."

The two donned their cloaks and set off with Fei Sheng following at a tactful distance. Xiao Chiye held the umbrella as they walked to Yao Wenyu's courtyard together.

Seeing that it was empty under the eaves, Shen Zechuan addressed the maidservant who came over to receive them. "Why aren't all of you inside waiting on him?"

The maidservant bowed in greeting and answered in a hushed tone, "My lord doesn't like anyone to wait on him at night."

Taking Shen Zechuan's hand, Xiao Chiye motioned for the maidservant to withdraw. He gave the umbrella a shake to rid it of snow. "Yuanzhuo has his pride."

"I don't see Qiao Tianya." Shen Zechuan glanced around, then looked back at the door before them. "Let's knock."

He had just raised a hand to do so when the door opened from the inside. Qiao Tianya appeared in his day robe. He bowed slightly in greeting and stepped aside to make way for them. “Yuanzhuo… He has yet to retire for the night. He’s waiting inside for Your Lordship and Er-ye.”

Yao Wenyu was sitting up inside. His face was freshly washed, head tipped back against his chair as he rested. Hunu had swatted the book on his knee until it slid to the ground. Xiao Chiye bent to retrieve it for him and glanced at the cover. “A cartograph. There’s a similar set of maps in the study of your Plum Blossom Manor.”

“Er-ye spent such a large sum on that place. What a pity to leave it behind in Qudu.” Yao Wenyu’s voice was like the tinkling of jade. He had wiped away all signs of his fatigue before inviting them in. Angling his wheelchair, he motioned for Xiao Chiye to take a seat.

As Shen Zechuan untied his cloak, he observed Yao Wenyu’s complexion. “You’ve traveled such a long distance. I shouldn’t have summoned you to the hall today.”

“The snow is beginning to melt. Falling sick with the change of season is inevitable; it was only a matter of time.” There was no one else around, and Xiao Chiye was an old acquaintance. Yao Wenyu allowed himself to relax more than usual. He poured tea for Shen Zechuan, his movements showing no sign of his chronic affliction. “Your Lordship must still be thinking about Qudu.”

“The spring plowing is around the corner.” Shen Zechuan pressed his index finger against the teacup. The agate stone on his ear swung in the dim light. “If the investigation of Dancheng continues, the remaining seven cities

will be implicated too. The outcome concerns all the granaries across the empire."

"Sacrificing a pawn to save a rook is a tried and true practice of the noble clans," Xiao Chiye said, picking up the remaining pieces from a finished game of weiqi on the small table nearby. "If Xue Xiuzhuo has truly pushed them into a corner, then it's not entirely impossible that they'll sacrifice Pan Lin."

"Xue Xiuzhuo killed three birds with one stone this time," Yao Wenyu said. "He used the bribe of gold to pull Liang Cuishan into his camp, which then hastened the investigation into Dancheng's field taxes. That in turn set the stage for an investigation of Chuancheng's private tariffs. What's brilliant about this move is that there had to be some history between the grain levies intendant and the Helian Marquis—something traceable—such that the empress dowager couldn't defend him. But this can't be the only reason Kong Qiu was willing to aid Xue Xiuzhuo."

Seeing Hunu stalking toward the side of his foot, Shen Zechuan quietly shifted it aside. He looked dubiously at the cat as he said, "Qi Zhuyin's deployment against the Qingshu tribe was an emergency. The empress dowager obstructed the Ministry of War and refused to give her approval, most likely because she feared another investigation into the Ministry of Revenue's accounts. If Xue Xiuzhuo was perhaps willing to give the Grand Secretariat several million taels of silver for Qidong's war, Kong Qiu would be a fool to turn it down."

Hunu set her paws on Shen Zechuan's boot and stuck her tail in the air in an expansive stretch. She meowed a few times and nuzzled against Shen

Zechuan’s calf. Just as she was about to paw at Shen Zechuan’s robe, Xiao Chiye picked her up by the scruff of her neck.

Xiao Chiye looked askance at the little cat. “That’s right—I almost forgot. Xue Yanqing still has a sum of silver in his hands.”

Hunu dangled in the air. Under Xiao Chiye’s stare, she folded her ears back, put up her front paws, and dared not move again. Xiao Chiye released the cat, and she landed deftly on the ground. Tail in the air, it padded over to the wheelchair and leapt back onto Yao Wenyu’s lap to request pets.

Yao Wenyu stroked her. “If that’s so, Marshal Qi would owe Xue Xiuzhuo an incredible debt for making up the shortfall in funds for her army. If the empress dowager continues to dawdle, she’ll lose her chance to make the first move.”

“This problem is easy to resolve.” Shen Zechuan raised his eyes to look at both of them. “The empress dowager need only arrange a marriage for Marshal Qi, and Qidong’s military power will be split in two.”

“To marry Marshal Qi…” Xiao Chiye considered this. “The prospective groom would have to have a noble title. Of the handful of titled old men in Qudu right now, none are suitable—nor can they hold her in check.”

“The Helian Marquis has been implicated in this saga with Chuancheng; we might as well kick him out of the running.” Shen Zechuan took a weiqi stone from Xiao Chiye’s hand and set it on the board. “But the young marquis, Fei Shi, holds no official post, correct? Let him marry Marshal Qi and ship him off to Qidong to be a pretty vase in her house. He’ll hold a portion of Qidong’s military power, which he will gladly hand over to the empress dowager. What’s more, Fei Shi and Pan Lin are close friends. If

Fei Shi comes into such a position of influence, Pan Lin may have a chance to get back on his feet, as long as he doesn't die before then."

The Hua Clan had been marrying their daughters off for nearly a hundred years. Now it was finally the empress dowager's turn to marry off a son. Just as Xiao Chiye had said, abandoning a pawn to save a rook was a familiar tactic for the empress dowager. This time, the pawn she was planning to cast aside was not just Pan Yi, but also the Helian Marquis. Xue Xiuzhuo had already gotten a hold over Chuancheng—Liang Cuishan had their true accounts in his hands. Now, the Fei Clan would have to bear responsibility for it.

The empress dowager had been at the mercy of others for the first half of her life. Taking the defensive position in a conflict was nothing new for her. Rather, by necessity, she was used to dealing blows from the back foot. Only one could stand on top as the supreme ruler of the land. If the heir apparent, Li Jianting, could, then why not Hua Hewei?

"To date, the Li Clan has lost, through the machinations of the empress dowager, the Guangcheng Emperor, the Xiande Emperor, and the Tianchen Emperor, as well as the crown prince during the reign of Yongyi." Xiao Chiye looked down at the white weiqi stone in his palm. "If they lose that girl too, the Zhou empire really will have to change hands."

Li Jianting stood in the sleet, her cloak draped around her. Through the white curtain of rain and snow, she faced the empress dowager from afar.

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The empress dowager looked at the young heir apparent and saw the shadow of the Guangcheng Emperor in her features—that husband who had held her back half her life, the shackle that had trapped her in the harem. Now she stood at the pinnacle of power. She no longer feared those eyes.

Vile spawn of incest, the empress dowager thought, and smiled benevolently at Li Jianting.

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Chapter 218:
Planning for a Rainy Day

THE END OF the second month arrived in a blink. The ongoing investigation of Dancheng had become a major scandal known throughout the capital. No headway was made even after a fortnight with Pan Lin cooped up in the hearing hall. The case became the subject of hot debate among the students of the Imperial College. They pinned their hopes on Xue Xiuzhuo, and the memorials impeaching Pan Xiangjie piled up by the day.

Shortly after the snow stopped, a group of merchants from Juexi arrived in Qudu.

Xiao-Wu was wrapped up like a dumpling against the cold, yet he was agile as he leapt from the carriage at the checkpoint to chat merrily with the clerk in charge of tax collection. The drapes of the carriage behind him lifted, and Ge Qingqing, now sporting a short beard, stepped off.

Ge Qingqing flicked a copper coin into the air and caught it with a steady hand as he grinned at the clerk. “How many times have these goods of ours come past you? Surely we know each other well now. I hope my lord will grace us with your presence on Donglong Street tonight. I still need to thank you properly for looking out for my younger brother here last year.”

The clerk, his book of taxes tucked under one arm, knew this man as a merchant from Juexi. When Xiao-Wu had escorted their wares along the roads last year on Ge Qingqing’s behalf, he had forked over a considerable sum at this checkpoint. Now that the clerk was finally meeting the man

himself—albeit for the first time—he was as chummy as if they were real brothers.

The clerk jumped off the wagon with an exclamation of surprise and cupped his hands in salute to Ge Qingqing. He laughed brightly. “I’m just a lowly clerk with ink stains on my fingers. How am I worthy of being called ‘lord’ by Master Ge? *You* are the master here—*our* master!”

Ge Qingqing had been away from Qudu for an entire year. He noted the many checks being carried out at the city gates, where guards were carefully scrutinizing the travel permits and registers of all the merchants coming and going. Without batting an eyelid, he said to the clerk, “Brother, it’s such a chilly day. How long do you have to stand out here? The queue of merchants back there still seems rather long.”

The clerk accepted the tobacco Ge Qingqing passed him. He had received substantial bribes from Ge Qingqing’s subordinates and was more than happy to socialize with him. He promptly started grousing, half in jest, “Well, until the city gates close, of course! If we were good for anything else, who would be willing to stand around here like a pole all day? It may surprise you, but around a hundred merchants pass through here each day, and a great number resort to skullduggery to evade taxes.”

“They must be real scum,” Ge Qingqing said with feeling. “Makes it hard to carry out your duties.”

“Exactly!” The clerk was delighted to find a sympathetic ear. “In all my time collecting taxes here, of everyone I’ve met, Lord Ge, you are the most astute and honorable.”

Ge Qingqing patted the man on the shoulder and offered a few more words of comfort.

“Did my lord make the trip in person this time to close a big deal?” the clerk asked.

Ge Qingqing lit his pipe. He’d never smoked during his time in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, but pipes and tobacco were indispensable tools for socialization in Juexi. He hummed agreeably, then turned aside to exhale smoke. “Business isn’t easy these days. Wherever I go, they’re so strict with their checks. It’s the same everywhere—if we don’t go through Chuancheng, we have to go through Dicheng. And if you have to pass through a few different regions, the border taxes alone on large shipments will do you in. I’ve long since given up hope of making a fortune. You’re in a much better position here, my brothers,” he lamented. “You can’t go wrong working for the government, and you look mighty imposing doing it too.”

“You can only say that because you haven’t spent much time here.” The clerk puffed on his own pipe. “Some of these arrogant sons of bitches barely see us as human just because they’ve got a few coins to rub together. They throw their weight around and boss us this way and that when they come through here. Those people walk all over us.”

The clerk’s complaints were laced with half-truths. Tax collection was no doubt a lucrative job; the people he dealt with day in and day out were merchants who hailed from all over the land. Few would make trouble right here at the gates of the capital, wherein numerous nobles and even the ruler of the land resided. The more discerning merchants all took the initiative to grease the clerks’ palms. Most of the clerks assigned to this checkpoint knew someone above them who’d given them a leg up. But it was also true that they absolutely couldn’t afford to offend large merchant powers like the Xi Clan when they occasionally came through.

“It’s been hard on all of you here.” Ge Qingqing waved a hand at Xiao-Wu, signaling for him to bring the wagons through. “How about this? I’ll put together a banquet at Yanyu Tavern on Donglong Street and wait for you there. Once you and the other brothers here are off duty, head straight over. We’ll drink to our hearts’ content.”

“You’re too kind!” the clerk exclaimed. “In that case, how can I refuse such a generous invitation?!”

Ge Qingqing smiled and took his leave, following the line of merchants into the city. Xiao-Wu led the horse around and asked, “Qing-ge, why are you treating them? They’re all rats, and greedy ones at that!”

“Master said to go fishing.” Ge Qingqing tossed the copper coin he’d been playing with to Xiao-Wu. “How can we hook a fish without bait?”

The tariffs at the city gate checkpoints were overseen by the Qudu Tax Office, which fell directly under the supervision of the Ministry of Revenue. The clerks were lowly and relied on their backers higher in the ranks to vouch for them. They might skim a little off the top, but they had to be careful not to go overboard. For instance, the large shipment of goods Ge Qingqing had transported last year had resulted in several thousand in private taxes. The clerks didn’t dare swallow it all up themselves; they embezzled a small fraction of it and handed the majority of the sum to the old men at the top.

Ge Qingqing had returned to the capital on Shen Zechuan’s orders to fish for the identities of these higher-ups.

“Let’s go.” Ge Qingqing patted Xiao-Wu on the back and gazed at the fresh dusting of snow atop the glazed tiles. “We’ll get our old manor back first.”

Yao Wenyu's illness showed no improvement for many days, no matter how many bowls of medicine he drank. It was only on the morning the Embroidered Uniform Guard planned to test out the new horses that he finally felt well enough to venture outdoors and enjoy the breeze. Fei Sheng, meticulous as always, set up screens to block the wind beneath the canopy before Shen Zechuan even gave the order. He completed the arrangement with a charcoal brazier, all to ensure Yao Wenyu stayed warm.

Shen Zechuan caught sight of Xiao Chiye at the front of the group, where he was saying something to Haerigu. Without shifting his gaze, he said to Yao Wenyu, "Of course Ge Qingqing is homesick after being in Juexi for so long. He's a native of Qudu; he still has kinfolk there."

The agate dangling from the prefectural governor's fair earlobe swayed and brushed against his fur collar, a breathtaking sight. Red suited him. All those white furs and robes he favored softened the dazzling beauty of his features, making him look overly amicable when it was necessary for him to be just the opposite. Only red drew out his sharp, penetrating edge. It was a process like honing a blade: The higher up he sat, the more conspicuous were those sharp edges he'd hidden in the shadows.

"All the key officials in the Qudu Tax Office are from the noble clans." Yao Wenyu appeared sufficiently spirited. He had draped a blanket over his lap, unwilling to reveal even a hint of weakness in the presence of outsiders. "If Your Lordship intends Ge Qingqing to make his move there, you can make use of Xi Hongxuan's old acquaintances."

"That won't do." Shen Zechuan watched as Haerigu mounted a horse. The Embroidered Uniform Guard on the other end of the field mounted theirs

as well; Fei Sheng was leaning over to speak to Qiao Tianya. “Most of Xi Hongxuan’s old connections are involved with Xue Xiuzhuo in some way. It was only due to a great deal of effort on Xue Xiuzhuo’s part that Xi Hongxuan was able to establish himself in the capital during the reign of Xiande. These people aren’t trustworthy. We would have to screen and select them carefully before using them.”

“Now that Pan Lin has been dismissed from his post,” Yao Wenyu said, “Liang Cuishan is the pawn with the most promising future. I only fear Ge Qingqing won’t make it in time for the Dancheng case if he has to carve out a new path of connections on his own.”

“We can’t intervene in the Dancheng case.” Sensing movement at his waist, Shen Zechuan lowered his eyes and saw Hunu reaching her paw toward the tassel of his fan. “Regardless of who wins or loses that game, it’s of no benefit to me. I sent Ge Qingqing back to Qudu not to put a finger on the scale, but to wait to see who comes out on top.”

Yao Wenyu didn’t notice Hunu playing; his eyes were fixed on Qiao Tianya on the riding track.

The recruitment criteria of the Embroidered Uniform Guard of Zhongbo had been set with Qiao Tianya as the standard. Dressed in fitted robes today, he bent in the saddle and scooped up Ding Tao, who was running between the horses, and tossed him to Gu Jin on the horse behind him. Then he hooked Li Xiong’s collar with his riding crop and tossed him to Gu Jin too.

After a delay, Yao Wenyu said, “The fifth month is when the busy farming season ends. Libei is still fighting a war. I see Your Lordship is planning for a rainy day.”

Farm work such as plowing and sowing would be wrapped up by the fifth month. At this point, the pressure on the Grand Secretariat would ease, leaving them free to turn their attention to Zhongbo and Libei. Shen Zechuan had to ensure his supply lines would not break. He was shouldering the military provisions for Libei, Zhongbo, and Qidong this year, yet he had lost access to the Xi Clan's copper mine in Juexi, while the Liuzhou port he was planning with Yan Heru was still in its infancy. If Qudu impeded their trade routes any further, the northern front would be at risk.

"If Xue Yanqing comes out on top," Yao Wenyu said, glancing at Shen Zechuan, "what weakness of his will Your Lordship exploit?"

"I can't find one." Shen Zechuan swung the tassel on his fan. "I couldn't find Xue Yanqing's weakness even back in Qudu. There is nothing this man would not forsake. He stole Xi Hongxuan's vaults right out of my hands, then donned his old official's robes and carried on with his usual work. He has my admiration."

Snowcrest sped over the field, drawing a wave of cheers. Xiao Chiye tugged on the reins and grinned at Shen Zechuan from afar.

The frostiness in Shen Zechuan's eyes melted. He turned his fan around, tucking the tassel into his palm. "The Quancheng silk case was a clean job as well. I can't catch him. But no man is an island—not even him."

Xue Xiuyi pressed the handkerchief against his nose as he blew. He prided himself on being a virtuous and lofty man of letters, yet his manner was rather crude. His official's robe was disheveled, the hems black and wrinkled. Xue Xiuzhuo was at the height of his career and the peak of his power, yet after all this time, Xue Xiuyi had only stumbled his way into a

sinecure. Having squandered the family fortune in his early years, he now had to think twice before spending so much as a copper coin on a bowl of noodles.

The official beside him found Xue Xiuyi extremely tiresome, but he didn't dare show it openly. "You're still sick—it would be fine for you to rest at home for a few days. Why push yourself? I'll call a physician to take a look at you later."

Xue Xiuyi grew hot with embarrassment. He was the lawful son of a noble clan, yet his fellow official made it sound like he couldn't even afford a physician's fees. He crumpled the handkerchief and said, raising his voice, "I have an in-house physician to attend me! When have we ever lacked a physician at home? I've just been so busy with my official duties I haven't thought of it. I'll call for him to take a look when I return later."

His fellow officials all knew he was only pretending to lead an extravagant life. In fact, he was so poor he fought with his wife over it all day long. All his maidservants and other domestic help had been sold off. His colleagues mumbled a few vague words of agreement and left him alone.

It was getting dark, and the officials were leaving the office compound one after another. Xue Xiuyi sat on a cold bench facing the stove, attempting to dry his wet boots, until a draft blew the candle out. He had grown up in the lap of luxury. There had always been maidservants, young and old, to accompany him, even when he slept. He feared the dark. As soon as the candle was snuffed out, he hastily stood and hurried outside.

Several of his fellow officials were standing in the courtyard smoking their pipes and making plans to go drinking later. Xue Xiuyi reached the door just in time to hear one official say in a hushed tone: "Isn't it obvious? I've

long heard the Xue Clan treated their common-born sons harshly, and this eldest son of the family was the worst offender. But back during the Yongyi years, the old master of the Xue Clan let Lord Yanqing join the school precisely because their eldest boy really wasn't cut out for it. I heard Mister Changzong called the oldest son a hopeless case—he said he was beyond teaching!"

Xue Xiuyi's heart went cold. This was a man who cared very much about his reputation. He promptly shrank back behind the door and endured the shame as he eavesdropped.

"That's why Xue Yanqing is reluctant to promote him," someone else added. "Look, he had him placed in a yamen with practically nothing to do. The monthly salary he brings home is less than the beggars outside. It might have worked out if their clan had a noble title to inherit like the Fei Clan; too bad they don't."

"The other men Xue Yanqing recommended for office are all scholars from the Hanlin Academy without any political affiliation. Most of these people are successful candidates from the highest level of the imperial examinations; they're all virtuous talents. Compared to them, how is the eldest Xue supposed to get promoted? He doesn't know his head from a hole in the ground. I asked him to sort out the old court cases recently, and he somehow transcribed eight words wrong on a single sheet of paper."

They put their heads together and snickered. Xue Xiuyi's hands trembled. He gripped his wet robe, overtaken by the urge to charge out and rage at these despicable men mocking him behind his back. But he wasn't the man he used to be. Without the Xue Clan's honor and glory, he had to rely on

this meager salary to get by. He didn't dare shoot his mouth off the way he had when he'd humiliated Pan Lin back at Xiao Chiye's feast.

Who the hell does Xue Yanqing think he is?

Xue Xiuyi turned and spat onto the ground of his office.

Contemptible common-born son of a concubine!

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Chapter 219:
Grand Prize

SNOWCREST was invincible in the riding arena. The horse was the unofficial but undisputed king of the Hongyan Mountains. Even when pitted against Biansha ponies, those that could rival Snowcrest were few and far between. After riding a few laps for the joy of it, Xiao Chiye dismounted to drink the last of the tea in Shen Zechuan's cup. The warmth of the governor's lips still lingered on the rim.

"It's not every day we're all out here like this." Xiao Chiye set down the cup and wiped his hands with a warm handkerchief. "Why not offer a reward and let them have some fun?"

"In fact, I do have a reward in mind." Shen Zechuan turned to the maidservant. "Tell the riders I have a big reward for them if they win the race."

Xiao Chiye sat, his long legs taking up so much space that Shen Zechuan's were almost crowded out. "What's the reward?"

Shen Zechuan smiled but didn't answer.

The handful of men on the field had all stopped. Tantai Hu laughed. "This is too unfair to us Zhongbo men."

The generals of Libei were all adept in the art of horsemanship, but the guards from Zhongbo were not. As far as the prize was concerned, Gu Jin or Wu Ziyu could be expected to take it home; there was no suspense at all to this race.

Fei Sheng leaned over to Qiao Tianya. “Maybe you should give it a try?”

Tugging on his reins, Qiao Tianya finished greeting Gu Jin behind him and answered, “You represent the prefectural governor. Aren’t you ashamed to surrender without a fight? Tao-zi, come over here and do a lap with your Fei Sheng-gege.”

Ding Tao came over leading his horse. “Don’t be afraid. Jin-ge never outran me back in Libei. I’ll block him for you. You just focus on Wu Ziyu.”

“I’m not afraid.” Fei Sheng saw Qiao Tianya edging away and hurried to add, “But you can’t back out either! We brothers have to work as one!”

Qiao Tianya pointed toward the rear of the group with his riding crop. Fei Sheng turned and spotted Huo Lingyun atop a horse. “The last part of the track is narrow,” Qiao Tianya said. “Don’t get tied up with Wu Ziyu there. Just shut your eyes to everything else and spur your horse ahead. There’re plenty of people behind you to help block the others.”

By this, he meant he’d hold Huo Lingyun back and give Fei Sheng an opportunity to be the center of attention. For a moment, Fei Sheng didn’t know what to feel. He cupped his fists and saluted Qiao Tianya. “You’re a real brother!”

Yao Wenyu couldn’t hear their conversation, but as he watched Qiao Tianya backing away, he understood what they meant to do.

Taking up the teacup again, Xiao Chiye looked at the track and said pointedly, “That Qiao Tianya is far too polite.”

The race was a spur-of-the-moment affair, proposed as a bit of fun. But that didn’t mean the Embroidered Uniform Guard could afford to disgrace

themselves. The Libei Armored Cavalry and the Zhongbo garrison troops were both present, yet Qiao Tianya had handed this opportunity to Fei Sheng. The second master was implying Qiao Tianya lacked the necessary spirit.

Cradling Hunu in his arms, Yao Wenyu looked at Qiao Tianya and said nothing.

Shen Zechuan eased his folding fan open slightly and closed it again. He maintained his silence, looking as if he had everything in hand.

“Xiao-Sheng!” Yin Chang swung a leg over the fence and sat atop it as he let loose a barrel-chested shout at Fei Sheng. “Run fast! You better run fast! This old man will take you drinking if you w—”

Yin Chang was still hollering when Gu Jin’s horse shot forward like the wind. The old man ate a mouthful of dust, so anxious he nearly bolted to his feet.

Gu Jin and Wu Ziyu worked hand-in-glove to obstruct Fei Sheng’s path. Fei Sheng had been half a step too slow at the start; he couldn’t overtake them. Behind him, Ding Tao spurred his horse past Fei Sheng, coming up along Gu Jin’s outer flank. He pressed so close Gu Jin had no choice but to slow down, allowing Wu Ziyu to gallop ahead.

“Jin-ge! You hid a tael of silver in your old boots, right? They’re soaked through! Before I set off, the auntie outside our manor asked me when you’d be paying her back for the wine you drank on credit. So embarrassing!” Ding Tao spoke with increasing gusto. “I took the liberty of fishing that money out of your boots and paid off half of it. Half! Can you imagine? How much of a tab did you rack up? My accounts are all a mess now—”

Unable to take it, Gu Jin turned back and yelled, “Shut up!”

The instant his attention was diverted, Fei Sheng urged his horse into the inner lane. Gu Jin treasured his horse and was unwilling to risk any harm trying to muscle through. The two raced neck and neck for several lengths until Wu Ziyu felt a chill on his ass.

The width of the track was inconsistent. Once they cleared this stretch, a slightly wider bend lay ahead before it narrowed again. Gu Jin sought to edge Fei Sheng out before the bend, while Fei Sheng intended to overtake Gu Jin. Both shut their mouths tight and galloped through the dust. As they reached the bend, Gu Jin clamped his legs to his horse's side and charged ahead. Behind them, Ding Tao had fallen back, and Huo Lingyun had taken his place.

As Huo Lingyun closed the distance, Gu Jin could tell this man's horsemanship was decent; he was a more intimidating rider than Fei Sheng. The track curved sharply. As Gu Jin's horse turned into it, Huo Lingyun, gaining from the side, suddenly picked up speed. His pony's sturdy neck turned, pressing Gu Jin toward the inside.

Gu Jin yanked on the reins, but the horse couldn't slow in time. It was galloping so aggressively it careered sideways into Fei Sheng in the innermost lane. Seeing his path narrowing, Fei Sheng unconsciously tightened his grip on the reins to avoid a collision. His horse lurched to one side and scraped against the fence, breaking the wooden rails as it tore along. Whinnying, it stumbled over the splintered rails and crashed to the ground.

"Fuck!" Tantai Hu jerked to his feet.

The horse had twisted its front knees when it fell. Reacting swiftly, Fei Sheng threw his arms over his head as he rolled to the ground amid the cloud of dust. He was so startled he'd broken out in a cold sweat.

Gu Jin reined his horse to a halt. He dismounted and pulled Fei Sheng to his feet. Fei Sheng got up stiffly. His robe was soiled with mud from neck to knee. He scraped sweat off his face and turned aside to spit out a tooth, then assured Qiao Tianya, coming up behind them: “I’m all right!”

Huo Lingyun cracked his whip. On the narrowing track, he was steadily gaining on Wu Ziyu.

Wu Ziyu had heard the commotion behind him. He glanced at Huo Lingyun as he pressed in closer. “That was rather underhanded of you, huh, pal?”

Huo Lingyun dropped low in the saddle and shot forward like an arrow slicing through the wind. His forward charge was so swift and fierce, and he was so bent on overtaking Wu Ziyu, that he disregarded the fences on both sides even as the railings left bloody streaks across his legs.

“Motherfucker!” Wu Ziyu cursed as his own stirrup scraped splinters off of the wooden fence.

This half of the fence was already teetering on the verge of collapse after Fei Sheng’s crash. With an alarming creak, the fence toppled from the impact of his stirrup. Unwilling to race to the death with Huo Lingyun, Wu Ziyu wheeled his horse around and walked off the track. He spat into the dirt and threw his arms around his horse’s neck, his voice rough as he said consolingly, “My poor Smokey!”

Huo Lingyun was unstoppable as he galloped down the final stretch of track. Breathing hard, he pushed all the noise to the back of his mind as he raced with the wind. All that remained in his eyes was the finish line.

He had to fight for his future.

No one here was his brother; no one called him friend. He knew what it meant to earn a place in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, but it was far from enough. His aspirations lay on the battlefield. He had to carve out a place for himself in Shen Zechuan's sight; only then would he be entrusted with greater responsibilities.

Yin Chang repeatedly slapped his thigh in anxiety. He barely held himself back from breaking into a run and chasing after the man himself. He hollered, "No tricks! How could ya do that to your own—"

A new set of hooves sent mud splattering as they followed hot on Huo Lingyun's heels, like a bolt of lightning cleaving the earth in its wake.

"Qiao Tianya!" Tantai Hu lurched out over the fence and roared, "*Qiao Tianya!*"

Yao Wenyu's throat felt dry. He seemed to hear the sound of solid ice cracking as he saw Qiao Tianya's hair flutter wildly in the wind and the proud, bold spirit in the lines of his brows.

Huo Lingyun frowned slightly as he watched Qiao Tianya close the gap out of the corner of his eye.

Qiao Tianya barked out a laugh, tasting dust on his tongue. The two men pressed themselves to their horses' backs as they vied for control of the track between the toppling fences. Rarely was Qiao Tianya seized by the impulse to win; today, amid this boisterous din, he was once again the young master of the Qiao Clan who had galloped across Qudu a decade ago.

The low roar of the crowds' shouts shook the riding track. The colorful silk ball that marked the finish line hung just up ahead. The fences collapsed

one after another like snapped ropes under the rapid beats of the horses' hooves.

Huo Lingyun gritted his teeth. The wind whipped dust into the sky, where it swirled and danced. His chest was bursting with the desire to win. Suddenly, an iron bar appeared on the track ahead, fixed horizontally just above the height of a horse. There was no room for a rider, and the force of a direct collision would be enough to knock a man to the ground.

Huo Lingyun made a split-second decision. He released the reins and rolled off the sprinting horse to avoid the iron bar. As he hit the ground, he could hear Qiao Tianya continuing his charge. He blurted in astonishment, "Qiao—"

The chestnut battle steed had raced under the iron bar with no one on its back.

Yao Wenyu gripped the armrest of his wheelchair, all the breath stolen from his lungs.

A heartbeat later, Qiao Tianya flipped back into the saddle from the side of his horse. A cacophony of voices broke out over the field.

"Beautiful," Xiao Chiye remarked.

As the Embroidered Uniform Guard rushed toward him, Qiao Tianya grabbed the colorful silk ball and burst into hearty laughter. The bright, sunny day dissolved his downtrodden and disillusioned shell into the glistening sweat of victory. As he sat astride his horse, he was the very picture of a valiant, dashing hero.

Yao Wenyu's composed mien betrayed almost nothing, but he relaxed his grip on his armrests. He suddenly realized Qiao Tianya was looking in his

direction.

Their eyes met for only a moment—then Qiao Tianya dropped his gaze and dismounted. He bumped shoulders with Fei Sheng and stepped between him and Huo Lingyun. Fei Sheng didn't say a word. The race was over, and they had to go before Shen Zechuan to receive their reward.

Holding his folding fan, Shen Zechuan cut a tall, graceful figure as he rose to address them. "Since I've said it's a big reward, naturally money or material goods would be too thoughtless a prize. The position of commander of the Duanzhou Embroidered Uniform Cavalry has sat empty until now." He paused. "Today, this position is awarded to Qiao Tianya."

Sure enough!

Knee to the ground, Fei Sheng hung his head in dejection. They were surrounded by people here; he couldn't pull a long face in front of his master. But his disappointment was real. Only with difficulty did he steady himself enough to maintain his stoic expression.

"Fei Sheng will assume the post of the cavalry's vice commander. Same goes for Huo Lingyun. The Zhongbo Embroidered Uniform Guard is hereafter renamed the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry. Your unit will retain the authority to report directly to me on urgent matters, and you will not be subordinate to the Duanzhou Garrison Troops." The tassel of Shen Zechuan's fan swayed in the breeze. "You belong to me, Shen Lanzhou."

A private cavalry!

Tantai Hu and Gu Jin exchanged glances of mild astonishment. Everyone knew about the preparations for the establishment of the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry, but they thought this light cavalry would be

incorporated into the Duanzhou Garrison Troops and placed under the charge of the Duanzhou prefect’s yamen.

A private cavalry meant that the posts within the Embroidered Uniform Guard were functionally unchanged; they were still a troop directly under Shen Zechuan’s command. They were not subject to the supervision or inspection of the administrators in the six prefectures of Zhongbo; in fact, they had the authority to supervise and inspect the administrators. And unlike the garrison troops, wherein each rank reported to their direct superior, they served and reported only to Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye poured from the teapot and drank another cup of hot tea. Seeing that it was getting late, he said, “Tend to the horses before sending them back to the stables. Take good care of them.”

Fei Sheng immediately got to his feet and organized the clearing away of the screens and charcoal brazier while Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye took their leave. Yao Wenyu bent to take Hunu into his arms. When he straightened, Qiao Tianya was standing before him.

He blocked Huo Lingyun’s path and pointed toward where Fei Sheng was working. “Once you’re all done cleaning up here, wait in the main courtyard for your orders.”

Sensing the tense atmosphere, Huo Lingyun gave an indifferent nod and stepped around Qiao Tianya to help.

Yao Wenyu was looking down at the cat when a colored silk ball dropped into his lap. He raised his eyes, but Qiao Tianya’s gaze was still fixed on Huo Lingyun. Yao Wenyu grasped that silk ball in his hands. It still had Qiao Tianya’s sweat on it.

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Chapter 220:
Intentions

WHILE THE GOVERNOR and second master took their meal, Kong Ling and the other gentlemen drank tea in the side hall, waiting for them. Yu Xiaozai lowered his voice and said to Kong Ling, “I just hope everyone will get along today and not dampen His Lordship’s spirits.”

All of them had been present at the riding track, where they’d had a clear view of the fierce battle that had gone down on horseback. Fei Sheng was well respected among the Embroidered Uniform Guard, and he’d racked up quite a few achievements while serving Shen Zechuan. Huo Lingyun’s behavior on the track had caused great offense.

Kong Ling set aside his chopsticks and covered his mouth with a handkerchief. “His Lordship didn’t comment, so it won’t do for anyone else to make a fuss. You should take care not to belittle Qiao Tianya either. He must have extraordinary strengths for His Lordship to value him so highly.”

Of them all, Kong Ling had the clearest insight into Shen Zechuan’s intent. The horse race might have been a spur-of-the-moment idea, but the prefectural governor’s reward certainly was not. Fei Sheng had distinguished himself by risking his life to protect the governor, then delivered tangible results as the attendant officer who assisted Yin Chang in taking Fanzhou. No doubt Shen Zechuan would find a suitable use for Fei Sheng’s talents—but at the same time, Shen Zechuan would never let him hold too much power. He had to simultaneously maneuver Qiao Tianya and Huo Lingyun so these three men would mutually hold each other in check, an iron triangle under his

direct command. The outcome of today's race was exactly as the prefectural governor had expected.

Shen Zechuan drew a clear distinction between his personal affairs and his official duties. From the Embroidered Uniform Guard to the six prefectures, he was quietly establishing a network of checks and balances. When it came to the management of his subordinates, Shen Zechuan's methods were not as eye-catching as Xiao Chiye's, yet he remained always securely seated at the peak, holding every subordinate firmly in the palm of his hand and balancing them one against the other.

At this point, Kong Ling couldn't help sighing ruefully.

Qi Huilian truly was the teacher of the emperor.

Shen Zechuan tapped his weiqi stone on the table as he played against Xiao Chiye. They had rekindled an interest in the game after the round they'd played in Yuanzhuo's room, and were presently making a few moves as they digested their meals.

"Qiao Tianya's victory was unexpected," Xiao Chiye said. "Seeing him leading such a peaceful existence in Cizhou, I thought he'd seen through the secular world. He seemed on the verge of renouncing the pursuit of fame and fortune and taking up monk's robes."

"I thought so too." Shen Zechuan turned the weiqi piece in his fingers; the little round stone was cold to the touch. "But life is full of opportunities. Who knows what tomorrow may bring?"

Xiao Chiye propped his elbows on his knees and made a show of giving the governor his undivided attention.

Shen Zechuan set the piece down. “Qiao Tianya was a judge in the Embroidered Uniform Guard. He even had the authority to mobilize the guards when he tried to apprehend you at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds—that in itself was evidence of Ji Lei’s appreciation of him. Even as someone tainted by his family’s guilt, he was able to carve out a spot for himself in Qudu and rank above Fei Sheng. He couldn’t do any of that without both cunning and drive. I’d guessed he bowed out in Cizhou because he was disillusioned after seeing what happened to Yuanzhuo. But even if he desires to retreat, Yuanzhuo has pushed him back into the game.”

Shen Zechuan had hesitated over what to do with Huo Lingyun after their victory in Fanzhou. It had been Yao Wenyu who proposed incorporating the young man into the Embroidered Uniform Guard knowing that if Shen Zechuan agreed, he would have to call upon Qiao Tianya again. Huo Lingyun couldn’t hold his own against Fei Sheng, already long embedded among those troops.

“Qiao Tianya and Yuanzhuo—there certainly is something between them.” All at once, Xiao Chiye remembered the Venerable Master Yideng, of whom there had been no trace in all the time he’d searched for him. “Yuanzhuo’s ailment isn’t easily cured.”

Shen Zechuan nodded. “This is why Yuanzhuo pushed Qiao Tianya back into the game.”

After a moment of understanding silence, Xiao Chiye said, “The heavens envy a mortal genius.”

The atmosphere was heavy as Shen Zechuan nudged a weiqi piece forward under the candlelight. “None of the medicine Yuanzhuo is taking can

cure his illness at the root. Physicians come and go, but not one of them dares give a definitive answer."

"The poison he was given in Dancheng was meant to take his life." Xiao Chiye tossed a stone into its container. "Master Yideng hasn't been seen since the tenth month of last year. I asked Shifu back in the Libei homeland, and he had no idea either. The venerable master said when he left that he would return after the new year to check on my brother, but the third month is approaching and there's still no sign of him."

Shen Zechuan's health, too, was a constant weight on Xiao Chiye's mind. Seeing Yao Wenyu so frail, he couldn't help fearing Shen Zechuan would share the same fate. He rose and pushed aside the board, disregarding the pieces rolling across the table as he stubbornly stroked Shen Zechuan's temple.

Xiao Chiye's gaze spoke volumes. "By the fourth month at the latest," he said solemnly, his palm pressed against Shen Zechuan's cheek, "I'll find the venerable master, even if I have to turn the entire empire upside down to do it."

Lanterns hung high in the office compound, spilling their light over stone slabs swept so clean not a speck of dust remained. This courtyard was the newly appointed home of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. Several years ago, it had been a space for the officials of the Duanzhou yamen to rest their feet while on duty, and now it had been set aside as an office for its new occupants. The walls of several connecting rooms had been taken down to form a central hall.

Fei Sheng sat inside with one foot on a stool, drinking wine. Several of his brothers sat near him, digging through the drinking snacks until the plates

were a mess. From time to time, they all stole glances outside.

Huo Lingyun was squatting on the steps with his back to them, eating dry rations with cold water. A cuju ball came flying out of nowhere and smashed into his waterskin, which fell from his hand and soaked the corner of his robe. He swallowed his mouthful and turned to look in the direction from which it'd flown.

The guard under the tree grinned at him. "It's too dark out here. I couldn't see clearly."

Huo Lingyun picked up the ball, then got to his feet and wiped his mouth.

The guard teased, "At the count of two, throw it back to—"

Before he could finish, Huo Lingyun hurled the leather ball. It arched over the courtyard wall and disappeared from sight. Huo Lingyun rubbed a handful of snow between his hands and answered, "It's too dark out here. I couldn't see clearly."

Fei Sheng ate without turning his head. The guards beside him had all stood up. The man who had thrown the ball ducked past some branches and walked up to Huo Lingyun. He knocked into Huo Lingyun's shoulder, scolding as he laughed, "Son of a bitch, throwing it that far. Go get it."

One of the lanterns in the courtyard guttered out, plunging half the courtyard into darkness. Huo Lingyun felt a blow to his abdomen. He rolled up his sleeve and returned the punch. The steps were slippery, and the others tripped him up; his fist struck empty air. In the next moment, Huo Lingyun was thrown to the ground. He flung his arms over his head, protecting himself from the blows.

Qiao Tianya strode into the courtyard. He kicked the men away from Huo Lingyun one at a time without even lifting the hem of his robe. Voice frosty, he snapped, “Get the hell up, all of you!”

“What’s going on?” Fei Sheng shifted in his seat and turned to look down the stairs with perfect calm. “What are you guys doing, making a scene out there?”

Huo Lingyun still had his arms wrapped around his head. He was covered in shoe prints from the kicks he’d endured. He spat a mouthful of blood between his folded arms, then leapt nimbly to his feet.

Qiao Tianya fixed his gaze on Fei Sheng, who said innocently, “I didn’t hear a thing. Xiao-Huo, why didn’t you call for me?”

Huo Lingyun’s mouth was filled with grit and crushed ice. He spat out several more mouthfuls, ignoring Fei Sheng.

“Years ago, when we received our authority tokens—” Qiao Tianya ripped the token off the waist of the nearest guard and held it up for all to see. He raised his voice. “I fucking said that we have to be of one heart and one mind, that we have to be real brothers. Take off your tokens now. All of you!”

Not daring to hesitate, the guards in the courtyard removed their authority tokens one by one.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard’s authority token was a symbol of their identity, one they kept carefully; even loaning it out was strictly forbidden. Wearing this token, they had basked in glory in Qudu, and wearing this token, they had followed Shen Zechuan in his rise to power in Zhongbo. It was an embodiment of their own honor and dignity.

“Go on, throw it on the ground.” Qiao Tianya tossed the authority token down at his feet and kicked it away without so much as a glance. He looked around. “Do you think you can keep it just to desecrate it? I said, throw it down!”

The men tossed their tokens on the ground, not a one daring to meet Qiao Tianya’s eyes. They hung their heads, standing stiff as wooden statues.

Fei Sheng’s smile had faded. Wiping the corners of his lips, he said, “Isn’t this a little too harsh? What is there that we can’t sit and talk about instead of casting everyone’s dignity to the ground?”

“Whose dignity are you talking about?” Qiao Tianya asked Fei Sheng. “Everyone’s? Or yours?”

The flames of the fury Fei Sheng had been suppressing suddenly leapt high. He surged to his feet, pushing back the chair with a clatter. “Was it only my dignity he trampled today? He was trampling on *me*! What? So it serves me right to be a stepping stone for someone else? Qiao Tianya, you had it all worked out, huh?”

Qiao Tianya ordered, “All of you, out.”

The other guards in the courtyard immediately withdrew, leaving only the three of them behind.

Fei Sheng flung the chopsticks he was still holding into his wine cup. His fury blazed; he simply couldn’t take this lying down. He kicked over the table and whipped around to jab a finger at Huo Lingyun. “Does it feel good to step on me? Hm? You want to be the center of attention. You’ll vie for Master’s reward; you’ll even snatch away an old man’s military

achievements. You certainly want it all!” He pointed at Qiao Tianya and asked, voice cold, “Did you have it all planned out with him?”

“Yep.” Qiao Tianya turned to face him squarely. “We’re all plotting against you.”

The candlelight in the hall was bright, and it was here Fei Sheng stood, while Huo Lingyun remained outside in the darkness. Qiao Tianya stepped deliberately on that border between light and dark, interposing himself between the two men. On a snow-tipped branch of an old tree, a dark crow cawed. Fei Sheng’s chest heaved. He stalked closer.

“I put my life on the line following Master all over the land, and you’re screwing me over with this son-of-a-bitch newcomer!” Fei Sheng stabbed a finger at his own chest, so upset his eyes were red with humiliated tears. “I was the one who opened the gates of Qudu and defended Fuxian Peak in Dunzhou. I was with the old man when we took Fanzhou! So why can’t I have this position? Why does it have to be you?! To think I considered you my fucking brother!”

Qiao Tianya pressed a step closer. “You consider me your brother, yet you think I plotted against you? I told you a long time ago—don’t obsess over this. What’s meant to be yours will be yours!”

Fei Sheng gestured around the yard and shouted back, “And shouldn’t *this* be mine?!”

The crow on the branch startled into flight. The lanterns in the courtyard swayed, distorting the shadows on the ground. For a moment, the air crackled with tension. Then Fei Sheng knocked Qiao Tianya aside. He stomped past and descended the stairs in a few broad steps, ignoring the shouts from behind him as he sped out of the courtyard.

He couldn’t stay here a moment longer.

Fei Sheng didn’t look at anyone as he stalked out of the office compound. Having consumed a fair amount of wine, he kept a supporting hand on the wall as he walked. His hand slipped a few times, and he bumped his head against the stone of the wall, bruising his forehead. All of a sudden, he slid down and squatted at the wall’s foot. He wiped his eyes and cursed. “Fucking…”

A little more sober now, Fei Sheng blew his nose, only to hear someone else doing the same just up ahead. Startled, Fei Sheng jerked to his feet and saw a head pop out in front of him.

Yin Chang, his hands stuffed into opposite sleeves, was leaning against the wall, waiting for him. He smacked his lips a few times and said, “The hell you cryin’ for?”

Seeing that it was the old man, Fei Sheng didn’t move. He looked at him without a word.

“Come on. Let’s go.” Yin Chang stomped his freezing feet. “Let’s find a place to drink. It’s too damn cold to be standing around like this!”

Fei Sheng didn’t want to. He could be bullheaded when he wished, and right now, he was still fuming.

“So you got a tooth knocked out of ya,” Yin Chang said, rubbing warmth into his arms. “What are you getting mad at them for?”

Fei Sheng wiped his hands with a handkerchief and tossed it away, the look in his eyes as capricious as the weather. Eventually, he forced a smile. “What’s there for me to get mad over?”

Yin Chang craned his neck and examined Fei Sheng's expression. The light from the lanterns ahead didn't reach this spot. Fei Sheng angled his chin and turned aside so the old man couldn't see his face. Yin Chang was so cold he couldn't stand it. Shuffling his toes to get blood back into them, he said, "Since the position's already been given to him, so be it. Looks to me like you haven't done too bad yourself! Gu Jin is a man of outstanding abilities with those eyes and ears of his, and you're the only one in our Zhongbo who can compare. Even Qiao Tianya can't do that stuff. You've got your whole life ahead of you, so why get hung up on this minor scrap? Better be damn careful His Lordship doesn't see it, or he'll call you out for being petty."

Fei Sheng's fury blazed with fresh vehemence. Yin Chang took no notice as he continued, "The way you're trying to keep Huo Lingyun down at every turn, how do you expect anyone to respect you? Don't forget there are former members of the Dengzhou Garrison Troops in the Embroidered Uniform Guard now! Won't they be put off by your behavior? What does a commander do? He oversees an entire army. So how can this position be given to you if you can't be a little more tolerant?"

"So Qiao Tianya can be tolerant?!" Fei Sheng retorted. "Sure, Qiao Tianya is the only capable one!"

"Well, Qiao Tianya does indeed have that capability." Yin Chang sighed and went around to Fei Sheng's other side. The old man was short; when he stood near Fei Sheng, he barely came up to his shoulder. "Look at him. He never competed with you in Cizhou, yet he still has everyone's respect. Has he or hasn't he told you to stop stepping on Huo Lingyun like that? All right, save it! I know you're gonna say you didn't bully Huo

Lingyun—but did you ever assign him any of the Embroidered Uniform Guard's duties? No, you didn't."

"Am I his mother?" Fei Sheng huffed. "Is it my job to make sure he eats and drinks and pisses and shits as well?!"

Yin Chang leapt up and whacked him on the head. "You dope, why don't you get it?! You know what you did!" He pushed Fei Sheng. "Move it, now!"

Fei Sheng staggered under the force of his shove. Yin Chang kicked him in the rear and snapped, "I'd beat you if you were my son!"

Fei Sheng tugged at his filthy robe, so vexed he turned back and yelled, "I have a fucking father!"

"Keep your eyes on the road! If you want the position that badly, I'll go beg His Lordship tomorrow. I'll kowtow to him until you get it. See if that shames you!" Yin Chang took a few steps and added, "And *I* have a fucking *son*!"

This was news to Fei Sheng. In the time Fei Sheng had known him, the old man had never said a word about it.

"If he was still alive, he'd be about your age."

After walking in silence for a while, Fei Sheng asked, "How did he die?"

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Yin Chang's feet crunched over the snow; the clouds had parted, and he finally got a clear look at the road with the aid of the stars overhead. He shrank his neck into his collar and answered, "Starved."

Fei Sheng held onto the wall, not daring to talk back to the old man again.

When Yin Chang was young, he used to hang around on the streets. He was born in the dirt, the lowest of the low classes. With no skills or education, he went to great pains to enlist in the army just to fill his stomach. At the time, Qi Huilian's Yellow Register system was just beginning to be implemented in Cizhou. Yin Chang squeaked in just in time to exploit the last loophole in the registries; he joined the garrison troops, where he stayed for thirty years. He whiled away his days in the army with neither merits nor demerits. He was illiterate, but he got himself well-acquainted with the terrain. It was just as he had boasted to Fei Sheng: As long as he was in Zhongbo, he wouldn't lose his way even with his eyes closed. Ordinary bandits were no match for him.

He didn't like to bring up his wife and son, who had died of starvation during the reign of Xiande. Their deaths had been the beginning of Yin Chang's drinking problem. Looking back on his past, he felt himself to be like the mud beneath his own feet, someone who had never amounted to much in life.

"You have a future serving His Lordship. You have so much more promise than me." Yin Chang looked at the road under his boots. "Xiao-Sheng, a man has to walk on solid ground; you can't spend your life looking at the sky. You know it better than I do. The wiser and mightier the master, the harder he is to serve. You can't fool His Lordship—you can't hide the

ghost of a thought from him. You think the governor doesn't know about this temper of yours? Didn't he still go ahead and put you to work by his side? That's because you're capable! You've got your eyes pinned on Qiao Tianya and Huo Lingyun all day long, but they aren't walking the same path as you. You're an intelligent fella, albeit a silly one. Don't hold a grudge over this little thing and ruin the bond you've forged with His Lordship. That'll just wreck *your* prospects."

Fei Sheng felt only more aggrieved. He walked faster and wiped his face.

His father had been the common-born son of a concubine from a branch of the Fei Clan. By the time Fei Sheng was born, he was so far removed from the main lineage he could hardly count himself a relation of the Helian Marquis. What was more, his father was a gambler. Had he not died early, he would've lost his position as assistant commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard before he could leave it to his son. Fei Sheng had served a number of people. As a young man, in order to strengthen his tenuous connection with the Helian Marquis, he'd spent all his time licking the boots of the young marquis, Fei Shi. Later, he had followed Han Cheng, who had bossed him around like he was his bastard son.

He was no gentleman of virtue. He wasn't anything. He merely wanted something to show for his hard work, and to carve a name out for himself.

"You look down on Huo Lingyun, but I hear he comes from a good family too, and his father fought the bandits," the old man said. "His life's not been easy either. Why give him such a hard time?"

"He stole your credit!" Fei Sheng exclaimed.

“Let him have it.” Walking behind Fei Sheng, Yin Chang gazed up at his back. At length, he said, “How many more years do I have? Glory’s no use to me now.”

Fei Sheng was still young; he was tall and straight-backed, with a strong, healthy physique. Without realizing it, Yin Chang’s feet slowed. He suddenly realized this was as far as he could go. Even if he refused to concede to old age, he couldn’t catch up with the younger generation. A whole new world lay ahead of them. For a long time, he watched Fei Sheng continue to stride ahead down the road.

“Xiao-Sheng, this old man is a useless sod who can’t even keep his son alive. But believe me, I can tell you’ll live to a hundred and retire with great accomplishments to your name! So keep walking.” Yin Chang paused a moment, then blurted, “Keep walking forward!”

Fei Sheng looked back at Yin Chang. He found the old man’s gaze foreign. He had never been gazed upon so attentively by his own father, so he didn’t understand the hope and expectation that lay within those eyes. Still, he stopped and said, “You keep walking too.”

Yin Chang inexplicably started to laugh. Smoothing his messy white hair away from his weathered face, he said, “I’m old.”

In the end, there was no further commotion at the Embroidered Uniform Guard’s office. Even if Fei Sheng was unhappy, he knew where to draw the line. The next day, as he brought Shen Zechuan his medicine, Shen Zechuan asked mildly, “You were drinking?”

The prefectural governor was approving cases at his desk and didn’t look up at him. He seemed to be asking only in passing. Unsettled, Fei Sheng

answered truthfully, “I drank a little last night.”

Shen Zechuan held the approved cases out to him. “Head over to the office compound and deduct your salary penalty.”

Fei Sheng had not been on duty yesterday. Unable to make sense of it, he took the cases and began hesitantly, “I wasn’t on—”

“Didn’t I tell you to handle recruitment?” Shen Zechuan finally looked at Fei Sheng. “You haven’t submitted the list of names; the job is not complete.”

Fei Sheng was taken aback. Then delight overtook him. Still grasping the cases, he fell to his knees with a *thud*. “Master is wise. I’ll get it done right away!”

With the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry’s commander position going to Qiao Tianya, Fei Sheng had assumed his previous assignments would be handed over to Qiao Tianya as well. Recruitment was a particularly important task that involved scouting and vetting new members, and was hugely significant to the makeup of the newly established light cavalry. He’d never expected to be able to keep the task.

Shen Zechuan leaned forward and cast a sidelong glance out the window. It had been sunny day after sunny day in Duanzhou now that they were nearing the third month, and the snow in the courtyard had more or less melted. Faint light filtered through the window paper and struck his right ear, throwing a small but dazzling reflection on his neck, which swayed with his movement.

Xiao Chiye was standing in the courtyard, where Gu Jin had just delivered him news from Qudu.

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Chapter 221:
Quandary

XIAO CHIYE PULLED open the bamboo blinds as he entered, bringing with him a trail of cool breeze from outside. Fei Sheng tactfully took his leave.

Placing the opened letter on Shen Zechuan's desk, he said, "In the second trial for the Dancheng case, the Pan Clan shoved a servant from their manor forward to take the blame. They intend to condemn Pan Yi for mismanagement of his people in order to extract Pan Lin from the case unscathed."

Shen Zechuan read the letter over. "The Pan Clan's occupation of the commoners' fields has desolated Dancheng. Nine out of ten houses there stand empty. They merely need to check Dancheng's census register and they'll see that the displaced commoners left destitute last year alone numbered in the thousands. Handing over one servant won't be enough. Pan Lin manages the eight cities' taxes within the Ministry of Revenue. There's no way he's unaware of how much is missing."

"The members of the Pan Clan in charge of the field taxes have already been thrown in prison." Xiao Chiye shifted, blocking the light from the window. "Every single one insisted they were blinded by their own greed and didn't act at the Pan Clan's behest."

Shen Zechuan brushed the paper with his fingertips. "Pan Xiangjie, that wily old fox."

Pan Xiangjie had seen firsthand how formidable Hua Siqian and Wei Huaigu were and had long since made preparations for this day. The men he'd put in charge of Dancheng's field taxes were all servants whose families had served the clan for generations. They were born into the house, and shared a common lot with the Pan Clan. Shielding Pan Lin now meant protecting the lives of their whole families, young and old. Of course they were willing to keep their mouths shut and take the blame.

"If Xue Xiuzhuo dares to strike now, he must hold serious leverage against the Pan Clan," Xiao Chiye said.

"Considering that he's brought Kong Qiu and Cen Yu over to his side, he may very well have Dancheng's real accounts in hand." Shen Zechuan thought for a moment. "But if so, he didn't present them."

The Three Judicial Offices were conducting a joint trial for this case, and Pan Lin had already been dismissed from his position pending prosecution. Xue Xiuzhuo only had to instruct Liang Cuishan to present the evidence during the proceedings, and they would emerge victorious. Even if they only succeeded in bringing down Pan Lin, it would have a pivotal effect on the current division of power in Qudu.

"I've been wondering about this," said Xiao Chiye. "The only thing that could keep Xue Xiuzhuo from making a decisive move is the spring plowing." The sun slanted through the window at a new angle and spilled onto the side of Lanzhou's face. Xiao Chiye raised an arm to block it, refusing to let it peek. "The beginning of the plowing season for the thirteen cities of Juexi is right around the corner."

"But Juexi was free from disaster last year, and the granaries of the thirteen cities are well stocked." Seemingly unaware of his Er-lang's

possessiveness, Shen Zechuan went on, “Qudu didn’t allocate any military provisions to the five commanderies of Qidong over the winter—they merely replenished Qudu’s granaries—so they should have grain reserved for the spring plowing. What is Xue Xiuzhuo afraid of?”

“If all goes to plan, then there’s no issue.” Xiao Chiye sat on the table’s edge and looked down at Shen Zechuan. “But what if something goes awry before the seeds are sown?”

A hint was all Shen Zechuan needed to make the connection. He set down his brush. “The empress dowager is trying to use Qi Zhuyin’s deployment to empty Juexi’s granaries.”

Draining Juexi’s granaries would require a demand of incredible scale—such as a requisition for military provisions. The empress dowager had turned this possibility into a threat: If Xue Xiuzhuo insisted on digging deeper into the matter, the spring plowing in Juexi would be delayed or abandoned. The livelihoods of tens of thousands of people hung over Xue Xiuzhuo’s head. He had to give way in this, even if he didn’t want to.

“The empress dowager managed to get the upper hand even while at such a disadvantage,” Xiao Chiye said. “If Xue Xiuzhuo agrees to the requisition of military provisions, then Juexi’s granaries will be left vacant. To carry out the spring plowing, Juexi will have to borrow grain from the eight cities’ reserves, which are controlled by the noble clans. In that case, Xue Xiuzhuo can’t offend them now; he’ll have to give up the field taxes and make peace with the empress dowager, who represents the nobles’ interests. But if Xue Xiuzhuo refuses the requisition and there’s no one to replenish the military provisions of the five commanderies, Qi Zhuyin will be left high and dry.”

Juexi not only shouldered the burden of supplying Qudu's granaries but also Qidong's military provisions. If they lacked grain during the plowing season, the local prefects would have to report the exact amount of the shortage in each region to the Provincial Administration Commission, which would then have to think of some way to make up for them.

Under normal circumstances, the Ministry of Revenue would coordinate this. Jiang Qingshan would issue memorandums of debt to the administrators of regions that had bumper harvests the previous year in order to borrow grain from them, and everyone could negotiate whether payment would be in silver or agricultural products from their own territories. This time, however, the eight cities were the only region with grain to lend. If he hoped to convince the empress dowager to loan Juexi grain after its stores were emptied to feed Qidong's soldiers, Xue Xiuzhuo would have to pause his investigation into the field taxes of the other seven cities, and perhaps even drop the ongoing case against Dancheng entirely.

"Even if he has the money, there's no other grain for him to buy. But the uproar over the field taxes has already alerted all the perpetrators. If he misses his opportunity, they'll bury the evidence; it will be even harder to investigate in the future. Besides, this case has drawn the attention of the Imperial College. If Xue Xiuzhuo retreats now, the students are sure to denounce him in writing, just as they did Cen Yu and the others before." Shen Zechuan slowly leaned over the table. "This trap the empress dowager laid is brilliant. She merely went with the flow and moved a few pieces on the board, yet she managed to put Xue Xiuzhuo in such a tight spot."

What was more, the empress dowager had taken full advantage of Shen Zechuan's own moves. The military provisions he had supplemented Qidong

with were made up of embezzled grain Yan Heru had consolidated from the granaries in Hezhou and Juexi. This requisition from Qudu would essentially see Juexi supplying two rounds of military provisions in just half a year. Naturally its granaries could not bear the burden.

Xiao Chiye covered the top of Shen Zechuan's head with a hand. "And so Xue Yanqing, ever meticulous and thorough in his strategies, has found himself trapped in a deadlock."

"There is always a way." Shen Zechuan raised his eyes and said pleasantly, "If I were in his shoes, I'd simply take out the empress dowager."

As spring approached, the snow in Qudu began to melt, water trickling off the eaves along the streets. Fortunately, the public ditches had been newly repaired, so there was no repeat of the disastrous flooding of the year before. Still, though the Xue manor was in a desirable neighborhood, it was built too close to the house next to it, and the outer walls of both estates had become so waterlogged at the foundations that they had collapsed.

Xue Xiuzhuo had thus been sleeping at the Court of Judicial Review of late. When he returned home for a change of clothes, he saw the courtyard walls had already been rebuilt. He waved over the steward. "When was this repaired?"

He didn't bother with any unnecessary formalities in the management of his household. Yet the steward, a man getting on in years, was deferential as he kept pace at Xue Xiuzhuo's side. He answered truthfully, "The eldest madam returned a few days ago to visit Young Master Jin. She brought up the collapsed wall with the eldest master when she returned home, and he sent someone to repair it."

At this, Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes darkened slightly. He pondered it for a moment, finding Xue Xiuyi's actions unusual. The brothers weren't on good terms. Xue Xiuyi had squandered what remained of the family fortune after dividing up the clan's properties in order to live on his own. That he held a sinecure position in the Ministry of Revenue was only thanks to his relationship with Xue Xiuzhuo. The salary he earned there was barely enough to make ends meet. Where on earth had he gotten the money to help Xue Xiuzhuo repair the courtyard wall?

"Get the accountant to reimburse him," Xue Xiuzhuo said. "And the eldest madam doesn't need to make any more pointless visits to the young master."

Young Master Jin was Xue Xiuyi's lawful son, eight years old this year. Xue Xiuzhuo had raised him by his side and refused to return him to his parents after Xue Xiuyi left the Xue Clan's manor. Xue Xiuyi had come to ask for the child back on several occasions, but when Xue Xiuzhuo refused to see him, he had reluctantly given up.

The steward acknowledged his order.

Xue Xiuzhuo didn't have much to pack, and what he did was easily brought along. He never wore silk or satin; his most ornate clothing was his official's robe. He stayed often in the office compound, with only a mute boy servant to attend him in his study. He had barely any maidservants, and ate plain, simple fare. These were all habits he retained from working at the provincial levels as Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue.

Xue Xiuzhuo finished packing and prepared to return to the office. The steward held the umbrella for him and gently advised, "My lord, you always

stay at the compound without anyone to serve you. This weather has been so changeable of late; you ought to dress more warmly."

When Xue Xiuzhuo reached the main door, the mute boy stepped forward to take the umbrella, greeting him with the wordless sounds he could manage. Xue Xiuzhuo nodded to him and turned back to the steward. "I'm leaving all the household affairs in your hands. I'll have my monthly salary sent here. If there's anything the residence requires, go ahead and buy it." Since the day Xue Xiuzhuo was promoted, he had never taken the sedan again; instead, he went everywhere on foot. After giving his instructions, he turned and walked into the drizzle, the boy holding up the umbrella beside him.

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When he arrived at the office compound, he found Liang Cuishan had been waiting for some time.

“Lord Yanqing.” Liang Cuishan descended the steps and bowed in greeting.

Xue Xiuzhuo dismissed the boy and said, “We’ll talk inside.”

Liang Cuishan followed Xue Xiuzhuo into the office. The candles were lit, but the charcoal brazier was dark. When he took his seat, Liang Cuishan found the chair cold. He had taken a look inside this room while waiting earlier. It was simple and unpretentious, the only item of worth being the late Old Master Yao’s calligraphy hung up on the wall. The table, chairs, and benches were all common furniture.

If he hadn’t heard it himself, he would never have imagined Xue Xiuzhuo capable of shouldering the military salaries of all of Qidong.

“Chongshen, please speak freely.” Xue Xiuzhuo opened a window and sat down. “You’re here regarding the Dancheng field tax case, are you not?”

Xue Xiuzhuo was tall, and his demeanor was poised and unpretentious; being in his presence was like basking in a spring breeze. Although he was an important official of the imperial court, Liang Cuishan felt at ease in his presence. He didn’t have the pride of a noble family’s son, nor the prickliness of an official of humble origins. His frank and measured speech effortlessly won listeners over.

“That’s right.” Liang Cuishan produced a securely wrapped account book from his robes. “This humble subordinate is here precisely because of the field taxes case.”

Xue Xiuzhuo waited patiently for him to continue. “The empress dowager has issued a decree for Third Lady Hua to return for a visit,” Liang Cuishan said. “Due to her father’s health, Marshal Qi will have to accompany her in his stead. In my humble opinion, Her Majesty is trying to rush you.”

In fact, there was no doubt the empress dowager had called Qi Zhuyin to the capital at this time in order to put pressure on Xue Xiuzhuo. The marshal’s request for military provisions remained in limbo, and time waited for no man.

“The Grand Secretariat has drawn up a writ to allow Marshal Qi to deploy against the Qingshu tribe,” Xue Xiuzhuo responded, “but the empress dowager has put off her approval again and again. It’s not entirely a bad thing for Marshal Qi to come to the capital right now.”

“But the requisition of military provisions is still up in the air. If this drags on, I fear it will delay the spring plowing in Juexi,” Liang Cuishan said.

This dilemma was the reason Xue Xiuzhuo hadn’t rested in days. He and Jiang Qingshan had gone to great lengths to straighten out the account books of the thirteen cities, all to prevent Juexi from falling into the same problem of commoner displacement that plagued the eight cities. The empress dowager held a dagger aimed at his weak point; he couldn’t afford to act rashly.

If Liang Cuishan had not come to Xue Xiuzhuo today, Xue Xiuzhuo would have sought him out. “Chongshen, you’ve overseen the salt taxes in both Hezhou and Juexi. What can you tell me about Hezhou?”

It sounded like Xie Xiuzhuo was thinking of borrowing grain from there. Liang Cuishan looked hesitant. “This humble subordinate shall be direct. It will be difficult for Your Excellency to borrow from Hezhou. While

it’s true Hezhou had a bumper harvest last year, the grain levies were already shipped to Qudu, and what’s left is being kept in reserve for the spring plowing. Anything else would have to be borrowed from the Yan Clan. But Yan Heru is a tough nut to crack, and his wealth makes him difficult to convince. Even if we offer him money, he may not be willing to loan the grain. I fear he’ll take the opportunity to demand something else, and that’ll end up upsetting the balance in Hezhou.”

Xue Xiuzhuo contemplated all this.

What he lacked now was grain, not money—even if he had the money, he couldn’t purchase the grain. Had the problem been Qidong’s military salaries, he could simply hike the border tariffs in Hezhou and Juexi and fleece the merchants for the sum he needed. But of course it had to be grain, a commodity much harder to raise.

Before his death, Hai Liangyi had planned to transfer Jiang Qingshan to Zhongbo to revitalize the six prefectures. Had this come to pass, they would have seen the first harvests last year; if they had then collected just a little more from Huaizhou, the problem of military provisions would have been resolved. But Zhongbo was now Shen Zechuan’s territory, and the trade route he’d established between Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou had cut off a large portion of Qudu’s grain supply.

“When Marshal Qi enters the capital,” Xue Xiuzhuo said, “she and I will have to talk it over.”

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Chapter 222:
Bluff

HORSES' HOOVES splashed through the mud and came to a stop before the city gates.

Cloak slung over one arm, Qi Zhuyin faced the towering city walls of Qudu, her back to the overcast sky. Day had yet to break. A young officer of the Eight Great Battalions stationed at the top of the wall spotted the Qidong banners and shouted, each word drawn out, "Open the gate! A most respectful welcome to Marshal Qi!"

The city soldiers gave an answering shout as they opened the gate. The gears and levers issued muffled clanks as the mottled city gate slowly rose. Within, soldiers from the Eight Great Battalions solemnly flanked the entrance, hands on the hilts of their swords as they stood in greeting.

Qi Zhuyin raised a hand, and the Qidong cavalrymen behind her drew back, leaving a substantial distance between them. She twitched the reins and led Hua Xiangyi's carriage onto the public roads of Qudu.

The soldiers on both sides stood at respectful attention, their eyes never once wandering.

Qi Zhuyin was in courtly dress today. Although she had never been conferred a noble rank or title, the empress dowager had granted her the exclusive right to wear the court attire of a marquis: a robe of deep crimson adorned with a mandarin square featuring the auspicious beast Baize, a symbol surpassing her actual rank. She had swapped the ceremonial guan hat with its black dome and gold columns, a staple of male formal attire, for a

hairpin adorned with a string of five pearls that swayed beside her cheek as the horse trotted on.

A row of court officials waited further down the road to welcome them, while Han Cheng—the Embroidered Uniform Guard's chief commander—and the palace eunuch Fuman stood off to one side. After an exchange of pleasantries, they led Qi Zhuyin into the palace.

The streets had been cleared ahead of their passage, so no one made a ruckus. Qudu was so silent all that could be heard were the melodious chirps of a lone sparrow. Han Cheng, riding at Qi Zhuyin's side, smiled. "Congratulations on your victory at Bianjun, Marshal. You have worked hard and performed an invaluable service to the empire. You're sure to be rewarded handsomely this time."

Although these words were spoken genially, they immediately struck a nerve. Qi Zhuyin had never been conferred a title despite her numerous military achievements. Now that Libei had revolted, Qi Zhuyin and the Qidong Garrison Troops' status had risen accordingly; they were the empress dowager's sole support on the frontier. Qi Zhuyin had seized the chance her new importance afforded her to remove the military inspector eunuch from her armies. She had become a thorn in Qudu's southeastern side, one that had no qualms about threatening the court into making concessions. Her attitude had long since incurred the displeasure of the empress dowager. Yet now there was a war with Biansha, and so the empress dowager found her valuable again. The promise of a noble rank was the empress dowager's chain around Qi Zhuyin's neck—she had no hope of conferment for the foreseeable future.

Qi Zhuyin disdained Han Cheng, and their previous encounters had been one unpleasantness after another. Feigning cordiality, she replied merely, “May it be as you say.”

The pair made small talk on horseback until they arrived at the palace gates. Fuman, who had followed the entire way, dismounted and personally came up to take Qi Zhuyin’s reins. The Eastern Depot had fallen into decline after the death of the Tianchen Emperor, and the Twenty-Four Yamen no longer had a prominent eunuch like Pan Rugui at their helm. Thus, Fuman behaved himself and kept a low profile.

Qi Zhuyin had no good opinion of palace eunuchs. Yingxi, whom the imperial court had assigned to Qidong as military inspector, was still locked in a cell in the Cangjun Commandery. Hoping not to attract Qi Zhuyin’s ill will, Fuman had gone to the special effort of dressing down, only daring something simple—he wore a gourd-patterned mandarin square on his robe beneath a simple coat, a coral pin on his official’s hat, and a pair of black boots.

Fuman bent at the waist and took the reins from her, all smiles as he said, gesturing to her horse, “He too is a war hero of our Great Zhou. This humble servant will make sure to feed him well on Marshal Qi’s behalf.”

Qi Zhuyin nodded and cast a look back at the carriage. She stood in place and waited for Hua Xiangyi.

Han Cheng tossed his riding crop to a waiting eunuch and snorted. Pointing at Fuman, he said with a snicker, “You sneaky old crook, kissing up to Marshal Qi now that she’s about to be rewarded.”

Fuman had a good understanding of Han Cheng’s character. He immediately said, “Commander Han, you’re shaming this humble servant!”

Then he lowered himself in a bow and drew closer to toady up to Han Cheng. “This humble servant has always depended on Commander Han. Say, when will you be able to fulfill this humble servant’s wish?”

“You’re the same age as me, yet you call me grandpa every chance you get,” Han Cheng said. “Even I’d feel embarrassed if this were to get out.”

Fuck you! Fuman cursed inwardly. *This bastard puts on airs all day. He says he feels embarrassed, but isn’t he more than happy to order us sorry wretches around? Thankfully heaven has eyes and made him sonless—so there is divine justice after all. How very gratifying!*

Fuman patted his chest and said with an ingratiating laugh, “When the lao-zuzong was still around, this humble servant was his godson. So going by seniority, doesn’t it make sense to address you as ‘grandpa’?”

Han Cheng looked down on these brownnosing eunuchs, but he was more than happy to boss them around like dogs. Near the end of the reign of Yongyi, the eunuchs were the masters. When Pan Rugui had led the Eastern Depot and lorded over the Embroidered Uniform Guard, Han Cheng was not yet its chief commander. It had filled him with envy to see Pan Rugui acknowledge Ji Lei as his godson. Now that the tables had turned, he was naturally gratified to watch Fuman bowing and scraping before him.

Fuman had attended the Eunuch School and knew how to read. During the Tianchen Emperor’s reign, he’d hitched his wagon to Xiao Chiye and managed to rise through the ranks into the Directorate of Ceremonial Affairs. When the Tianchen Emperor met his end at the hands of Mu Ru, he instantly switched sides. At Han Cheng’s orders, he summoned Xiao Chiye into the palace with an imperial edict, allowing Han Cheng to frame Xiao Chiye for regicide. He had done Han Cheng a service, and so Han Cheng allowed him

to continue managing all the important affairs of the inner palace. Fengquan had stepped down now, anyway. All Fuman had to do was accumulate enough tenure, and he could be a lao-zuzong too.

Seeing that Hua Xiangyi had yet to emerge from her carriage, Han Cheng asked Fuman, as if in passing, “How has the heir apparent been lately?”

Han Cheng had made the wrong move in the Imperial Prison that night—he had killed the boys, but had failed to kill Li Jianting. As a result, his own attempt to push a Han Clan’s son onto the throne had failed, and he had made an enemy out of Xue Xiuzhuo in the process. With no other card to play, he had arranged for Fuman to keep an eye on every move the heir apparent made in the palace.

Turning slightly away from Qi Zhuyin, Fuman answered in hushed tones, “Everything’s been as usual.”

“Xue Yanqing’s investigation of the Dancheng field taxes has thrown the imperial court into chaos.” Han Cheng glanced at Fuman. “The empress dowager has been worrying over it day and night, and it’s affecting her health. See if you can drop a hint to the heir to get Xue Yanqing to back off a bit.”

Fuman was momentarily taken aback. He lowered his head in acknowledgment. The key phrase in this statement was *back off a bit*. As for how to convince Xue Xiuzhuo to do so, that was for Fuman to figure out.

Li Jianting was no longer an untried girl, yet the empress dowager showed no sign of passing on the reins of power. She sat in place of the Son of Heaven, acting with the authority of the throne, and kept Li Jianting out of the imperial court. Li Jianting’s right to sit in on the proceedings was at the

suggestion of the civil officials acting as her teachers. And now that Xue Xiuzhuo was pushing the nobility into such a corner in the outer court, the empress dowager meant to teach him a lesson.

Fuman's heart pounded, but he dared not let his expression betray his inner turmoil. He kept his head lowered in a bow until Han Cheng left.

In the third month, the ice and snow melted, and Duanzhou suddenly turned warm and humid. Water dripped from the eaves, dampening the windowsills again. The pages of the old books on the table had curled from the moisture. Yao Wenyu drew up his wide sleeves and spread the pages open to dry.

Shen Zechuan stood beside the table and peered down at Yao Wenyu's books.

"Xue Yanqing will have to have a frank discussion with Marshal Qi regarding the requisition of military provisions." Yao Wenyu smoothed a corner with his fingers. "The Bianjun Commandery was the only region of Qidong affected by fighting last year, and the military provisions then were supplied by Qudu. The remaining four commanderies' military fields are intact. Xue Yanqing keeps a ledger of accounts in his mind; he will not fall into the empress dowager's trap so readily."

"Stumping him is simple enough." Shen Zechuan didn't raise his eyes, as if he was pondering the contents of the book. "The specifics of Qidong's harvest have yet to be reported. If Marshal Qi insists it's insufficient for their use, he has no way to prove otherwise."

The longer Yao Wenyu remained at Shen Zechuan's side, the easier he found it to distinguish the governor's moods. Right now, Shen Zechuan was

clearly jesting. The kind of shameless denial he was describing would never fool Xue Xiuzhuo, who was a proficient auditor of accounts.

Yao Wenyu was in no hurry. He asked, “In Your Lordship’s opinion, what should Xue Yanqing use to bargain with Marshal Qi?”

“Naturally, his biggest trump card,” Shen Zechuan said without hesitation. “He has the heir apparent in the palm of his hand, so in certain respects, he wields more power than the empress dowager. Qudu is a stickler for ethics and virtues. However effective the empress dowager is in her administration of the state, she’s only acting on behalf of the throne. She’s not the *real* Son of Heaven.”

The empress dowager was dependent on Qidong. She had married Hua Xiangyi into the Qi family, then held Qi Zhuyin down by refusing to promote her. At the same time, to ingratiate herself with Qi Zhuyin, she treated her quite generously in other ways: When Qi Zhuyin had ignored her orders regarding Yingxi and Lu Pingyan the year before, for instance, the empress dowager had not taken her to task. Thus did she maintain a careful balance, keeping Qidong pinned under her thumb at all times. She needed Qi Zhuyin to remain at her disposal, and in turn, Qi Zhuyin would be careful not to offend her while the prospect of noble rank was still up in the air.

But Li Jianting had no such considerations. She was Great Zhou’s rightful heir. She had the Grand Secretariat guiding her within the court and her prestige among the students to bolster her outside it. She also enjoyed the full support of the pragmatist faction helmed by Xue Xiuzhuo. Qi Zhuyin declaring loyalty to her would be perfectly justified. As long as Li Jianting could hold steady against the censors’ impeachments, it would be a matter of

a few words to confer a title upon Qi Zhuyin—the thing the empress dowager had never done, and in her current position, could not afford to do.

Shen Zechuan closed the book he'd been leafing through. "Every day Marshal Qi isn't conferred is a day Qidong's hold on military power remains unstable. Her lack of noble rank and title is the major roadblock to Qi Zhuyin's path to legitimacy. Imagine if she were to die on the battlefield or become bedridden from injury—her brothers of common birth would surely use the opening to seize Qi Shiyu's title. The grand marshal of the five commanderies sounds impressive, but without noble rank, she will always be a guest in that position, unable to inherit Qi Shiyu's legacy. The empress dowager fears Qidong will become a second Libei. She dares not bestow a noble rank upon Qi Zhuyin, but that fear is also her greatest weakness."

The only legitimacy Li Jianting lacked was military power.

The noble clans had first lost Wei Huaigu, then found themselves at a marked disadvantage after Hai Liangyi's fatal remonstration. The empress dowager was only able to stand on equal footing with the Grand Secretariat and Xue Xiuzhuo in this game because she held the remaining two major military powers of the empire—Qidong and the Eight Great Battalions—firmly in her grasp. After all, be it Kong Qiu or Xue Xiuzhuo, they were mere civil officials; they had the authority to engage in discussions of military organization and strategy, but not to deploy troops.

If Xue Xiuzhuo promised to confer the rank and title of marquis on her tomorrow, Qi Zhuyin could quit going around in circles with the empress dowager and simply swear allegiance to the heir apparent—and the allegiance of Qidong's troops would follow. Such a move would be akin to hacking off the empress dowager's arm.

“It all comes down to money.” Yao Wenyu took the book Shen Zechuan handed back to him. “Xue Yanqing can’t convince the marshal with his words alone. But he has the Xi Clan’s vaults. Now that he’s shouldering Qidong’s military expenses, Marshal Qi will have to consider the offer carefully.”

These calculations all relied on the premise that Qidong’s military fields were actually self-sufficient, and that they didn’t truly need to requisition grain from Juexi’s granaries. But in point of fact, Qidong’s military provisions this year were in Shen Zechuan’s hands. Qi Zhuyin had to weigh her options, taking Zhongbo into account. If Shen Zechuan was displeased with her decision to throw in with the heir apparent, the Yan Clan could cut off Qidong’s supplies, and Qi Zhuyin really would need to ask Qudu for grain. In that case, Xue Xiuzhuo would be back to his initial dilemma all over again.

“Xue Xiuzhuo or Hua Hewei.” Shen Zechuan laughed as he tossed Yao Wenyu’s spent brush into the bamboo holder. “Whom should I play with?”

Sunlight streamed over Shen Zechuan’s wrist. He held in his hand an invisible thread, one that could steer the situation in Qudu without so much as a whisper.

Yao Wenyu straightened the brush and said with certainty, “Looks like Your Lordship already has a plan.”

The sky had begun to gray with dawn as the palace maids stood in attendance under the palace eaves. They kept to the walls and out of the way, lanterns in hand to illuminate the path. Qi Zhuyin had come for an official audience with the empress dowager and was headed for Mingli Hall, while

Hua Xiangyi would have to wait in the empress dowager's chambers. The two of them could only walk together for a short distance.

Hua Xiangyi, who abhorred the cold, wore a fur muff that wrapped around her head. So elegant was her deportment that not even the tinkling of the jade ring pendants that hung from her waist could be heard as she walked. She was tall, only a little shorter than Qi Zhuyin.

Qi Zhuyin had been spending all her days in the Bianjun Commandery, and to date had hardly spoken more than a dozen words to Hua Xiangyi. Finding the silence awkward, she was about to say something when Hua Xiangyi asked, "Has Marshal Qi taken a look at the account books back home?"

It was then Qi Zhuyin remembered. "I looked through them when I was home last time. Thank you…" The word *mother* stuck in her throat. She was truly unable to say it to Hua Xiangyi's face—this woman was two years younger than she was. She hastily skipped over it. "…for going to the trouble."

Holding her hand warmer, Hua Xiangyi watched a crow flit across the gloomy sky and disappear among the palace eaves. It was a sight that had once been familiar to her. "You're too polite, Marshal."

Qi Zhuyin slanted a glance at the butter-yellow okra blossoms embroidered on Hua Xiangyi's collar. There was a touch of girlish charm hidden beneath her dignified veneer, something completely out of place in the deep silence of the inner palace. Yet for that reason, it appeared particularly refreshing and sweet.

Abruptly, Hua Xiangyi turned and looked at Qi Zhuyin. Her regard lasted only a moment, then she averted her eyes and said softly, "My aunt

summoned the marshal here for two reasons. The first is your mobilization against the Qingshu tribe, and the second is the requisition of military provisions. These two matters are in fact one. You will need to make a decision."

Qi Zhuyin was somewhat taken aback. What was Hua Xiangyi's intent in telling her this now? Qi Zhuyin's summons to the capital was no doubt so she could be used as a knife in the empress dowager's hand to coerce Xue Xiuzhuo and the Grand Secretariat to bend to her will. She had long heard about the case of Dancheng's field taxes.

Hua Xiangyi changed the subject. "Qudu is a tempest all year long. Even if one stands at the peak of its rooftops, one cannot get a clear look at the splendor before its stairs. What's more, the days are so cold. Many stores on Shenwu Street have closed, and those who drink themselves into a stupor at night are those with empty stomachs."

Slightly stunned, Qi Zhuyin looked at Hua Xiangyi, who had stopped in her tracks. Hua Xiangyi turned to the silent Fuman behind them and smiled. "Gonggong is as quiet as a cat."

Fuman's mind was awhirl. He'd vaguely heard something about the cold weather but wasn't truly paying attention. Seeing Hua Xiangyi pause daintily ahead of him, he only thought Third Lady Hua too beautiful to look upon directly. Lifting the lantern, he said with an apologetic smile, "This humble servant was afraid of putting a damper on my lady and the marshal's moods. I dared not make a din."

"We're here," Hua Xiangyi said to Qi Zhuyin, her voice soft. "You had better go ahead, Marshal."

A thin layer of frost glazed the newly planted flowers and shrubs lining the steps up to Mingli Hall. The front of the hall was wide and spacious, the floor polished to a gleam. When her name was called from within, a eunuch led Qi Zhuyin up the stairs. She felt a chill run up from her feet as she ascended. It was a sensation she couldn't get used to no matter how many times she passed this way.

The curtain parted, and Qi Zhuyin strode over the threshold.

The court officials waiting inside all rose to their feet. Qi Zhuyin looked neither left nor right as she made her obeisance to the empress dowager. Without letting down the beaded curtain before her, the empress dowager said with a smile, "Only two months have passed since I last saw Zhuyin, and already I miss you. It's bitterly cold over in the Bianjun Commandery. Do rise and let me have a closer look at you."

Qi Zhuyin raised her head. In her peripheral vision, she saw the heir apparent standing at the side of the hall.

The Minister of War, Chen Zhen, put his sleeves together and looked at Qi Zhuyin with worry in his eyes. Cen Yu, too, looked concerned. Only Kong Qiu seemed to be his usual self. The atmosphere in the hall was odd, much like the newly planted shrubs outside—lush and healthy, but only on the surface. The roots had long been damaged by the freezing cold.

The empress dowager, confident in her victory, was in no hurry to come to the point. After exchanging pleasantries with Qi Zhuyin, she said, "You are stationed at the frontier all year round, coming and going rain or shine. I've heard you refuse maidservants. Even the most robust good health can't withstand such torment without a devoted companion by your side to

tend to your needs.” Without waiting for Qi Zhuyin’s answer, she cast the Helian Marquis a sideways glance. “Just look at her.”

The Helian Marquis met the empress dowager’s eyes and lamented, “Seeing Marshal Qi only makes this humble subject think of Fei Shi, that good-for-nothing son of mine! He may have been born a man, but he has no lofty ambitions. It truly worries me.”

“Fei Shi has just come of age. He must have someone at his side to guide him, or even a good-natured child will stray.” The empress dowager studied Qi Zhuyin again. “Zhuyin, do you still remember the young Fei Shi?”

“Only vaguely,” Qi Zhuyin answered. “He’s Zhaoyue’s little brother.”

She answered bluntly, as was her way. But unspoken was the reminder that even Commandery Princess Zhaoyue had to address her as *jiejie*. There was a significant gap in age between her and Fei Shi.

“Fei Shi is young, and I worry he has no one to teach him,” the empress dowager continued undeterred. “You are the grand marshal of Qidong’s military forces, and he admires you very much. He talks about Qi-jiejie all day long and is always dying to run over to Qidong. You’re on good terms with Zhaoyue, and your families aren’t strangers to one another. If you have the time while you’re here, do meet with him and share some anecdotes from the frontier to satisfy his curiosity.”

Fei Shi was a man who had come of age. What was there that he couldn’t do on his own and needed Qi Zhuyin to teach him? Furthermore, Fei Shi was merely an idle young marquis. He had yet to inherit his father’s noble rank and title, and he held no official post of his own. He was so far down the ladder compared to Qi Zhuyin that him calling her *jiejie* was at best a joke.

The empress dowager's purpose, however, was clear. She intended to confer a marriage on Fei Shi and Qi Zhuyin in order to hold her down. Yet for the sake of those military provisions, Qi Zhuyin couldn't afford to fall out with the empress dowager just yet. "I daren't decline Your Majesty's suggestion. But my trip to the capital this time is strictly for military affairs. The threat at the border is of utmost urgency; this matter can't be delayed any further."

The empress dowager sat back slightly and tested her no further. She affably agreed, "Of course. The military report you sent last month gave an account of the Qingshu tribe's incursion. You won the battle, and you deserve a reward."

Qi Zhuyin had a clear handle on how things worked in Qudu. It was a filthy business. In pushing Fei Shi on her now, the empress dowager was merely reminding her to behave even as she dealt a blow to Xue Xiuzhuo. The issue of the military provisions was a thorny one—or would be, if she didn't have Shen Zechuan supplying her.

She abruptly recalled the words Hua Xiangyi had spoken earlier.

Qudu is a tempest.

What had she been hinting at?

"I've taken a look at the memorial you submitted to the Ministry of War. You want to strike while the iron is hot—you are not wrong, but now is not the time." Observing the hard set of Qi Zhuyin's mouth, the empress dowager continued, "The spring plowing occurs in the third month. If Qidong's soldiers march to war, the military fields will be left fallow, and your supply of grain come autumn will decrease. The shortfall will have to be made up by the granaries of other regions—but this is an impossible gap to

fill. The common folk of Juexi must eat too. It's not easy on the imperial court either. Hawkish militarism is never a wise policy; the ones to suffer for it will always be the common people."

The empress dowager made no mention of the granaries of the eight cities; she was plainly waiting for Qi Zhuyin to bring them up on her own. The instant she broached the subject, the problem could be kicked into Xue Xiuzhuo's court. And once everyone was caught in a deadlock, they would have no choice but to acquiesce to the empress dowager's arrangements. If Xue Xiuzhuo refused to drop the Dancheng case, if Qi Zhuyin refused to marry, then Qidong would neither deploy its troops nor receive its grain.

The silence in the hall was deafening. None of the ministers made a sound, while Qi Zhuyin quietly turned Hua Xiangyi's words over in her mind.

Li Jianting, who had never interjected before in Mingli hall, suddenly spoke up: "At the start of the year, the Ministry of Revenue reported on the harvest in each region. If Juexi is unable to bear the burden alone, can they not join hands with the granaries of the other provinces to make up the shortfall together?"

"The heir apparent doesn't manage court affairs and so does not know the ins and outs of this matter," the empress dowager replied. "Hezhou shouldered the burden of supplying provisions last year, and this year, they must supply grain to Qudu along with Juexi. No one has grain to spare."

Even in this exchange, they scrupulously skirted around any mention of the eight cities. Abruptly, Qi Zhuyin had a flash of insight.

The eight cities surrounded Qudu. Were *they* not the splendor before Qudu's stairs? Hua Xiangyi had spoken of not getting a clear look—a clear

look at what? The details of the eight cities' harvests! If the Dancheng field taxes could be falsified to such a degree, how many of the remaining cities' field taxes were genuine? The fields were not even properly surveyed; the eight cities could be hiding plenty more. But Hua Xiangyi's last comment had mentioned those with empty stomachs. There had been countless migrants from Dancheng last year, all of whom had fled rather than starve. Pan Yi must have known he couldn't hide the truth much longer—so why had he not set up porridge booths immediately?

Sweat trickled down Qi Zhuyin's temples as she thought to this point. *What a close call!*

The rattan chair creaked as it rocked, and expansive snow-white sleeves draped themselves across a pair of knees. Shen Zechuan opened his folding fan to block the sunlight. Yao Wenyu still sat in front of his table, tidying up the old books. All was quiet in the courtyard.

Shen Zechuan glanced up at the plum-blossom leaves over his head. When the mottled light fell on him, he caught it on his fan and held it before his eyes for a closer look.

Yao Wenyu flipped open a ledger stacked amid the old books. Opening it, he found that it was a record of grain prices from Chazhou's earliest days. He had looked through it previously, but by some curious coincidence, this time, he flipped right to the back page. He turned his wheelchair around to speak to Shen Zechuan, who was sitting under the eaves by the door. "In past years, the exorbitantly priced grain sold in Chazhou all came from Hezhou—but last year, Hezhou also had to cover the shortfall from the moldy military provisions as well as Qudu's granaries. The goods being transported and

traded in this account are all large shipments. Supposing Yan Heru also set some grain aside for the bandits of Mount Luo, then even if Hezhou enjoyed a bountiful harvest every single year…" He slowly flattened the opened pages of the account book. "…their granaries should be depleted by now."

He paused. "I initially suspected Yan Heru was selling grain he skimmed from Juexi and Hezhou, but when I saw Fanzhou's records of grain going into the prefecture, I realized neither had enough surplus for him to conduct that level of trade.

"Liang Cuishan took charge of collecting and recording taxes in Juexi and Hezhou as early as last year. Last time I spoke to him, Yan Heru mentioned he couldn't make any inroads with Liang Cuishan." Yao Wenyu wheeled his chair over and gripped the door frame for support, his expression suddenly shifting. "Then where did he get the grain he sold last year?"

Shen Zechuan turned his head and locked eyes with Yao Wenyu.

"The granaries of the eight cities," Yao Wenyu said, answering his own question. "The grain Yan Heru sold last year in Zhongbo all came from the eight cities." Yao Wenyu riffled through the account book in his lap. "The overpriced grain in Fanzhou and Dengzhou was sold via the old bandit chief, Cai Yu. Your Lordship killed Cai Yu, so Yan Heru didn't bother coming clean on this point."

The folding fan in Shen Zechuan's hand snapped shut. He was still leaning back, gazing up at the sunlight, but he'd seen the truth in a flash. "The empress dowager has no grain reserves in the eight cities—she can't supply Qidong's military provisions. She's making empty promises."

This bluff had completely trapped Xue Xiuzhuo. The eight cities' accounts were too convoluted; even Pan Lin himself might not necessarily

know which were genuine and which were falsified. The accounting of the Dancheng fields Xue Xiuzhuo investigated was indeed off the mark, and the harvest numbers Pan Yi had submitted to the Ministry of Revenue were fake as well. But the noble clans' reports of their limited remaining stores were real. They had taken the commoners' fields, yet they didn't have a single grain of rice to show for it—all of it had long ago been slyly rerouted to Yan Heru to resell at a profit.

The granaries of the eight cities were empty.

"Hua Hewei." Shen Zechuan laughed aloud. He couldn't help but marvel. "The empress dowager certainly is an impressive woman!"

If Xue Xiuzhuo dropped his investigation into the Dancheng fields over the requisition of military provisions—an enormous concession to the empress dowager—he would very soon realize that the empress dowager had no grain at all, and Qidong still couldn't deploy their troops. By then, however, Xue Xiuzhuo would not only have lost his current advantage, he'd run the risk of the Imperial College turning on him. He might even find himself subjected to suspicion from his own pragmatist faction.

Hua Hewei was not an official of the imperial court—she had her own way of playing among this horde of seasoned, calculating men.

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Chapter 223:
Waves and Tides

IN THAT INSTANT, gears whirred in Qi Zhuyin's mind as she weighed her options. She had to find the most suitable ally for Qidong in this tussle for power. The outcome of this match was crucially important; what happened here today might even determine how long Qi Zhuyin could retain her position of grand marshal.

At last she made up her mind. "I have yet to speak with the gentlemen from the Ministry of War and Ministry of Revenue, and am unfamiliar with the status of the granaries in other regions. However, the harvest last year in the four commanderies of Qidong with military fields was decent. If we deploy our troops now, we have enough to fight for two months with whatever help we can get from the other granaries."

"You are the general." The empress dowager spoke gently. "Naturally, you understand better than I do that it takes a month just to advance deep into the desert. It's already the third month. If you put off the spring plowing of the four commanderies now and fail to return from the front after two months, then the autumn harvest in the seventh month will be delayed. Zhuyin, it's not that I don't want to deploy the troops—I can't."

Qi Zhuyin appeared stymied. Once again, silence descended upon Mingli Hall.

The empress dowager slowly rose and smoothed her sleeves as she looked at the various ministers in the hall. She said earnestly, "If our Great Zhou's granaries were full, I would push to fight this battle even if Zhuyin

didn’t ask. But the imperial court is impoverished at present; we are in no position to subsidize a war. Besides, food is the highest concern of the people. Commit to this war, and the commoners of three regions will go hungry—is this not a reversal of our priorities? Boran, you saw the Ministry of Revenue’s report at the beginning of the year. You must know the status of each province’s granaries like the back of your hand.”

How would the court ministers dare to refute her in front of Qi Zhuyin? The empress dowager remained calm and composed, waiting for them to bring up the eight cities themselves. Kong Qiu stood to one side, clutching his own memorial with no expression on his face.

After a moment, he said, “The mobilization of troops is no small matter. There is a specific procedure that must be followed. Marshal Qi has just entered the capital; she has yet to discuss the situation in detail with the Grand Secretariat. Why not wait for us to speak tonight before making a decision?”

Kong Qiu was stalling, neither acceding to the empress dowager’s wishes nor making a decision on Xue Xiuzhuo’s behalf. He had transcribed a copy of the account book Liang Cuishan had straightened out. To have it in hand, yet still be unable to take down Dancheng—it was truly a pity.

After court was dismissed, everyone filed out of Mingli Hall. Fengquan stood before Li Jianting to drape her cloak over her shoulders. She slowed her steps to wait for Kong Qiu, who gestured for her to walk with him. He led the heir apparent down the stairs, and they stepped onto the open and spacious courtyard.

“Your Highness spoke bluntly today,” Kong Qiu said. “Your suggestion to pull from the granaries of all the regions is indeed a viable solution.”

Li Jianting pursed her lips briefly, then smiled. “You spoke to me about this problem a little at the start of the year. Of course I wouldn’t dare forget. It’s just that at present, it seems almost impossible to gather enough provisions for Qidong’s troops.”

The sky was bright now. Puddles on the ground reflected the blue dome of heaven, while the upturned eaves concealed the last dim shadows of the night.

Li Jianting took a few steps, thinking. “Lord Chongshen is rather amazing. I heard his mental arithmetic is both fast and accurate, and the accounts that pass through his hands never have mistakes. Since the case of Dancheng’s field taxes is temporarily deferred, perhaps the Grand Secretary can ask him to calculate all the surplus grain in the provincial granaries? If the three regions aren’t enough, there are still the eight cities. Everyone can work together to make up the gap.”

Kong Qiu smiled bitterly. “Since the military grain will be requisitioned from Juexi, the quandary right now is how to broach the subject of borrowing grain from the eight cities—”

Suddenly, Kong Qiu stopped and looked intently at Li Jianting.

Li Jianting had suggested the Grand Secretariat *calculate* the surplus, not continue the investigation. There was a world of difference in this one word. The Grand Secretariat could indeed ask Liang Cuishan to tabulate the remainder of the eight cities’ grain regardless of the empress dowager’s wishes. Since the Dancheng accounts were already established to be problematic—Pan Lin was still locked in prison, after all—it was only reasonable that the Ministry of Revenue do a recount of the eight cities’

remaining grain. This was the duty of the Ministry of Revenue. There was nothing wrong with that.

The flower embellishment between Li Jianting's brows was brilliantly red, yet it did not outshine the heir apparent's regal aura. She seemed to mention the grain issue only in passing; under Kong Qiu's gaze, she even managed to look a little lost.

Qi Zhuyin spotted Xue Xiuzhuo the moment she set foot outside the palace gates. She shrugged her cloak off her shoulders and tossed it to Qi Wei, who had come forward to receive her. Meeting Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes, she pointed ahead—they could talk as they walked.

"I heard from Minister Chen earlier that it was you who forked out the money for military salaries this time," Qi Zhuyin said. "Thanks a lot."

Of course, there was more to Qi Zhuyin's gratitude than mere words. Xue Xiuzhuo walked along for a while before saying, "By mobilizing troops now, the marshal means to keep Amur in check. The war in the north is at a critical stage. This is a battle that ought to be fought."

"Before I entered the capital, I heard military provisions for this campaign must be requisitioned from Juexi." Qi Zhuyin carefully didn't mention that she already had provisions from Shen Zechuan. "Jiang Qingshan won't agree to it, will he? You people have your difficulties too."

Mornings in Qudu were not as cold now that spring was approaching, and the stalls along the streets were starting to bustle again. As both wore their official's robes, no one dared approach them, and the common folk kept their distance. But once the pair walked past, they all stared after Qi Zhuyin and whispered among themselves.

The legendary Qi Zhuyin, the Windstorm through the Scorching Plains, had neither an especially strapping physique nor a majestic and imposing aura; she was merely taller than most women. Yet she had a certain steadiness that allowed her to withstand those prying eyes and speculating voices without blinking.

“You’re right, though. It’s a battle that ought to be fought.” The string of five pearls hanging from her hairpin swayed in the breeze, and the wisps of hair at her temples brushed the side of her cheeks. “Libei may have revolted, but the Libei Armored Cavalry remains Qudu’s impenetrable fortress in the northeast. The Prince of Libei died in battle, and the northern front has yet to see a victory this year. The fighting is intense. You people far away in Qudu —what do you know of the Twelve Tribes of Biansha? A few military reports are not enough to convey the terrifying scale of Amur’s ambitions. You mustn’t think they’re really incapable of breaching our borders.”

Qudu was the seat of the emperor, the culmination of the Zhou empire’s hundred years of prosperity. Unlike the war-torn and weary frontiers, it had never felt the edge of the Biansha scimitars. A mere seven years had passed since the fall of Zhongbo, yet the panic and fear of that time had been forgotten. Here, the terror of the Biansha Cavalry had long faded.

“Amur has united six tribes under his command, and he’s imitating our military farming system in Gedal. If Qidong doesn’t deploy troops this year, Qudu will no longer be able to act as though this doesn’t concern them. I’ll be frank. My soldiers can’t outrun the Biansha Horsemen. If Libei falls and Luoxia Pass goes with it, then the Biansha Horsemen can slaughter their way into Qudu, and I won’t be able to get here in time to stop them.”

The wind buffeted them. Qi Zhuyin stopped and turned to look at Xue Xiuzhuo. The towering vermilion walls of the palace rose behind her, their stacked tiers of upturned eaves soaring into the clear sky. There was not a cloud overhead. Here Qudu lay, bare and exposed to the first light of day.

"I *must* deploy my troops." There was no eagerness in Qi Zhuyin's eyes.

Qidong rarely participated in Qudu's political games. Qi Shiyu was smart: Whether it was handling Qidong's relationship with Libei or maintaining their amity with the noble clans, he had an instinct for when to pick sides. Not so for Qi Zhuyin. She did not possess her father's patience. She was willing to risk being dismissed from her post and prosecuted for attacking the Qingshu tribe because she knew the state of the battlefield was far more pressing than the political affairs of the court.

The trap the empress dowager had laid for Xue Xiuzhuo was brilliant, but the fact that she was also trying to trap Qi Zhuyin in a marriage with Fei Shi meant that she would not be granting Qi Zhuyin any noble rank. On the contrary, she seemed to want to divide the military power currently in Qi Zhuyin's hands.

Perhaps there were generals more capable of fighting wars than Qi Zhuyin. But at this moment, with the battlefields of both the north and south at stake, she would never trust Qidong's military power in the hands of anyone but herself. Now that the empress dowager had demonstrated her intent, there was no way Qi Zhuyin would sit still and resign herself to her fate.

"As long as the memorial to mobilize troops is approved and the Ministry of War issues the deployment order before I leave…" Qi Zhuyin

smiled. “Then the military provisions won’t be a problem. I won’t requisition any grain from Juexi.”

Xue Xiuzhuo brushed aside a willow branch whipping at him in the wind. “Deal.”

The incense in the hall was overly strong; sitting in it too long made Hua Xiangyi slightly ill. Aunt Liuxiang hurriedly had the maids open the windows. She helped Hua Xiangyi sit on the settee nearest the window and said earnestly, “Third Lady has been gone for only half a year, and already you’ve grown so thin. Qidong lies right next to the desert. How hard it must have been on you.”

Hua Xiangyi clutched her handkerchief. “Auntie is the one who has lost weight.” She glanced toward the small prayer hall in the inner chamber.

“Her Majesty misses you. She prays to the Bodhisattva every day to ask for blessings on your behalf,” Aunt Liuxiang said. “When she caught a chill that kept her awake all night, she only wanted to see you. Medicine didn’t help, so she had me light a lamp and read the letters you sent.”

They were still conversing when the eunuch outside announced the empress dowager’s arrival. Hua Xiangyi rose to greet her aunt, but the empress dowager dismissed all the formalities. She took Hua Xiangyi’s hands right there in the doorway and looked her over carefully. “Why have you lost weight? Are you not used to the food in the manor in Qidong? Let me pick a few chefs from our Dicheng for you. Take them with you when you leave.” The empress dowager grew so emotional her eyes were glistening with tears. She stroked Hua Xiangyi’s temple. “Has my little girl been well?”

Hua Xiangyi gripped the empress dowager's hands. Her voice hitched as she answered, "I've missed Auntie."

The empress dowager's heart nearly broke upon hearing these words. She led her inside, refusing to let Hua Xiangyi sit respectfully off to the side as she took her seat on the settee. Instead, she insisted on having her niece right next to her. "Does that Qi Shiyu treat you well? What about Qi Zhuyin? I heard those concubines are a restless lot who don't know their places. If anyone affronts you, have the matrons tie them up and send them away. Anyone who disagrees can answer to me."

Hua Xiangyi smiled through her tears.

The empress dowager gathered her into her arms like a child. "I used to comfort myself with the thought that I could still send letters even after you married. Only now do I know how it truly feels to be so far apart."

She had wanted to pick the best possible husband for Hua Xiangyi. She hadn't expected to marry Hua Xiangyi to Qi Shiyu. But Qi Shiyu had at least been a hero for a lifetime, and aside from his age, she could begrudgingly admit him to be worthy of Hua Xiangyi—or so she had thought. Who knew the man would suffer a stroke? Already she regretted this move. The empress dowager wished with all her heart to at least give all that was good to Hua Xiangyi.

Hua Xiangyi leaned against the empress dowager; once she was done reminiscing, she asked, "Has Auntie been well?"

"The court is such a mess. I hardly eat or sleep." The empress dowager paused before continuing bitterly. "I am old, after all. My mind and spirit are not what they were."

Hua Xiangyi straightened a little and said in a gentle voice, “Why must Auntie work so hard? There’s the Grand Secretary to assist in state affairs. I heard that the heir apparent is a keen learner too.”

The empress dowager had supported the Xiande Emperor, and if she chose, she could support the heir now. In Hua Xiangyi’s opinion, Li Jianting was far more reliable than the previous two emperors. Although she resided in Qidong, she was well acquainted with all the major happenings in Qudu.

Heaving a long sigh, the empress dowager recalled how Li Jianting had looked earlier when she spoke in Mingli Hall and felt even more wary of the girl. “You’re only seeing the surface. Do you think she’s easy to get along with? She’s no more than a cheap gutter girl a few scoundrels pushed forward to challenge me.”

Hua Xiangyi was silent a moment. “Living in Qidong, I now have a better understanding of Biansha and Zhongbo. Auntie, Shen Zechuan has risen to prominence in Zhongbo, but he isn’t wicked by nature. Reclaiming Duanzhou and redistributing the fields to the people are all good things. I asked Zhaoyue last year about the situation in Dancheng. She said Pan Yi wasn’t sure of the best course of action either—too many people had starved to death. The two of them wanted to set up porridge tents, but the granaries were empty. There was nothing they could do.”

The empress dowager slowly closed her eyes as she listened. “You have a kind heart. But we are at a critical juncture—our next move may decide whether we win or lose.”

She opened her eyes and gazed at Hua Xiangyi. “You grew up in the palace, away from Dicheng, so there is much you don’t know about the world. When our family properties were confiscated during the reign of

Xiande, I was stranded, trapped in the harem. During that time, even the eunuchs of the inner court dared to come before me and extort me for silver. Had it not been for the Helian Marquis's help, plenty more would have been waiting to humiliate us. Just look at that Xue Clan. Their son of lawful birth is an idiot who squandered his family's fortune. Now he allows himself to be bossed around all day; where is his nobleman's dignity? Then look at Xue Yanqing. He's a scoundrel among scoundrels. He's only pursuing the Dancheng field taxes so he can use us as a stepping stone for the heir apparent. If he gets the full investigation he wants, which of the eight cities will escape unscathed?"

The empress dowager drew herself up on the settee. "Without the clans, what can I use to fight against them? If the field taxes are a problem, I will square the accounts myself in the future. No one else has any right to interfere. As for that Shen Zechuan—he's in bed with Xiao Chiye. I know precisely what they're trying to do. You think he's looking at the land under his feet, but he's clearly eyeing the throne. Traitors like him will do anything to enhance their reputation. After all, Shen Wei's name is still hanging over his head!"

The words Hua Xiangyi had spoken had been chosen as tactfully as possible. She watched the empress dowager gasp for breath in the wake of this outburst and knew her mind was made up: She would never coexist with the heir apparent.

Hua Xiangyi opened her mouth, only to close it again. There was a light patter on the eaves; to her surprise, a sun-shower had begun to fall.

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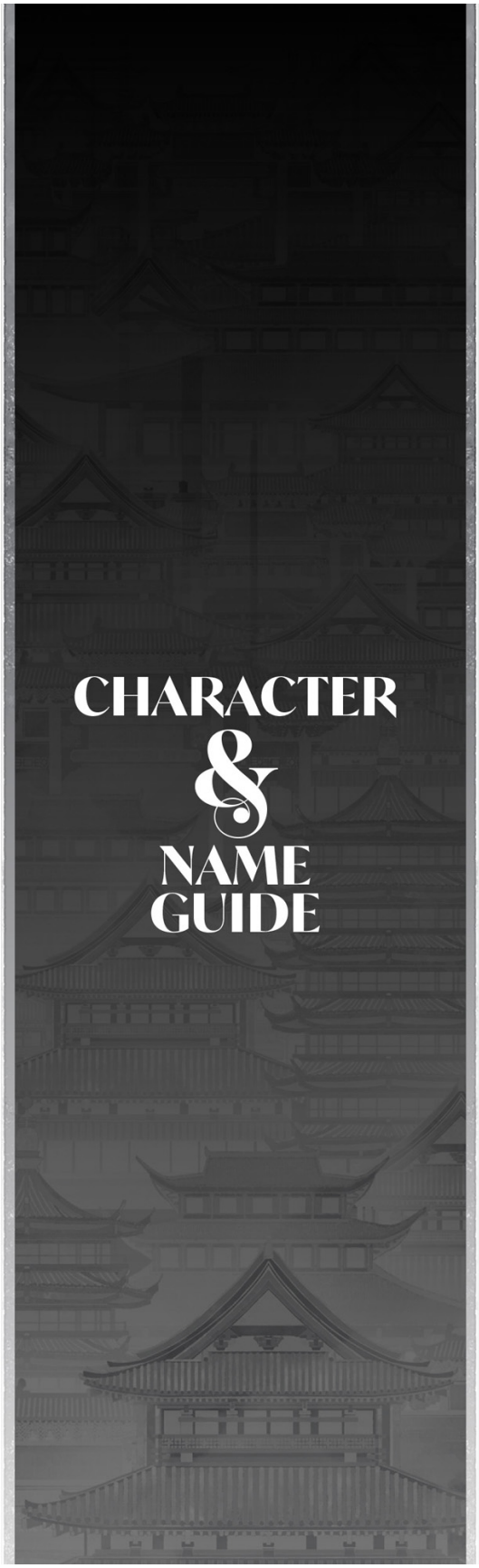
CHARACTER
&
NAME
GUIDE

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Characters

Main Characters

SHEN ZECHUAN

SURNAME SHEN; GIVEN NAME ZECHUAN, “TO NOURISH THE RIVERS”

COURTESY NAME: Lanzhou (/ orchid; boat)

TITLE: Prefectural Governor

WEAPON: Avalanche (/ Yang Shan Xue) : A straight, single-edged saber longer than normal swords. It used to belong to Ji Gang’s adoptive father.

The eighth son of common birth to Shen Wei, the Prince of Jianxing. Due to his father’s alleged collusion with the enemy during the invasion of Zhongbo that led to the slaughter of thirty thousand soldiers in the Chashi Sinkhole, he was sentenced to imprisonment and was obligated to pay his father’s debt as the last surviving member of the Shen Clan.

XIAO CHIYE

SURNAME XIAO; GIVEN NAME CHIYE, “TO RIDE ACROSS THE WILD”

COURTESY NAME: Ce’an (/ spur; peace)

TITLE: Supreme Commander of the Imperial Army

WEAPON: Wolfsfang (/ Langli): A single-edged executioner’s blade forged by the best craftsman in Qidong.

The second and youngest son of lawful birth to Xiao Fangxu, the Prince of Libei. Sometimes called Xiao Er, or Second Young Master Xiao, and later Er-ye, or Second Master.

QUDU

CEN YU : Courtesy name Xunyi. The Left Censor-in-Chief of the Chief Surveillance Bureau.

CHEN ZHEN : Minister of War.

COMMANDERY PRINCESS ZHAOYUE : Daughter of the Helian Marquis and wife of Pan Yi.

FEI KUN : The Helian Marquis. Father of Fei Shi and Zhaoyue.

FEI SHI : Lawful son of Fei Kun, the Helian Marquis.

FENGQUAN : A junior eunuch, Pan Rugui's "grand-godson" and Mu Ru's younger brother. Promoted to Director of the Seal at the Directorate of Ceremonial Affairs. Li Jianting's personal eunuch.

FUMAN : A eunuch of the inner palace.

GE QINGQING : Judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard who served under Ji Gang when the latter was still the vice commander. Currently stationed in Juexi to keep a tight watch over the Xi Clan.

HAI LIANGYI ("VIRTUOUS AND PROPER"): Courtesy name Renshi. Once the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat and teacher to Yao Wenyu.

HAN CHENG : Chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard after Ji Lei's death.

HAN JIN : Military Commissioner of the Eight Great Battalions.

HUA HEWEI : The empress dowager, widow of the Guangcheng Emperor.

KONG QIU : Courtesy name Boran. The current Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat.

LI JIANHENG : The Tianchen Emperor. As the final survivor of the Li Clan, he ascended the throne after the death of the Xiande Emperor.

LI JIANTING (“SWORD; THUNDER”): Originally named Ling Ting (“clever; pretty”). After the passing of the Tianchen Emperor, she is brought forward as the imperial heir to the throne.

LI JIANYUN : The Xiande Emperor. Son of the Guangcheng Emperor and elder brother to Li Jianheng.

LIANG CUISHAN : Courtesy name Chongshen. A member of the Ministry of Revenue who works under Pan Lin.

PAN LIN : Courtesy name Chengzhi. Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue and lawful son of Pan Xiangjie.

PAN XIANGJIE : Minister of Works. Head of the Pan Clan of the Eight Great Clans.

PAN YI : Prefect of Dancheng. The second son of the Pan Clan, born of the first concubine. Pan Lin’s younger brother. Husband to Commandery Princess Zhaoyue.

PAN YUAN : The younger brother of Pan Lin and Pan Yi, of common birth.

QI HUILIAN : Grand mentor to the deceased crown prince of Yongyi, and later, Shen Zechuan’s teacher.

WEI HUAIGU : Former Minister of Revenue.

XI HONGXUAN : Former Secretary of the Bureau of Evaluations in the Ministry of Personnel. Xi Gu'an's brother and the second son of lawful birth in the Xi Clan.

XIAO-WU : A young member of the Embroidered Uniform Guard sent to Juexi with Ge Qingqing.

XUE XIUYI : Xue Xiuzhuo's elder brother of lawful birth.

XUE XIUZHUO : Courtesy name Yanqing. Assistant Minister in the Court of Judicial Review. A capable young official and son of common birth in the Xue Clan.

JUEXI

JIANG QINGSHAN ("GREEN HILLS"): Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi.

XI DAN : Steward of the Xi Clan.

LIBEI

CHEN YANG ("MORNING SUN"): Leader of Xiao Chiye's guards.

GU JIN : Guard to Xiao Chiye. He has excellent hearing.

GUO WEILI : Commanding general of Third Sand Camp.

JIANG SHENG : Commanding general of Second Sand Camp.

LU YIZHI : Heir Consort of Libei. Xiao Jiming's wife and Lu Guangbai's sister.

TANTAI HU (“TIGER”): Member of the Imperial Army.

WU ZIYU : The youngest general in Libei; was commanding general of Border Camp until Xiao Chiye took over.

XIAO FANGXU (“RISING SUN”): Prince of Libei. Father to Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming, and one of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou.

XIAO JIMING (“APPROACHING BRIGHTNESS”): Heir of Libei and commander of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Xiao Chiye’s elder brother; he is married to Lu Yizhi, Lu Guangbai’s sister. One of the current Four Great Generals, he’s known as “Iron Horse on River Ice.”

XIAO XUN : Grandson-Heir of Libei. Lawful son of Xiao Jiming and Lu Yizhi.

ZHAO HUI (“MORNING SUN”): Xiao Jiming’s dependable deputy general.

ZUO QIANQIU : Xiao Chiye’s shifu and one of the current Four Great Generals, he’s known as “Thunder on Jade Terraces.”

QIDONG

HUA XIANGYI (“RIPPLES OF FRAGRANCE”): The third lady of the Hua Clan and adored niece of the empress dowager. Wife of Qi Shiyu.

LU GUANGBAI (“EMPTY EXPANSE”): Commanding general of the Bianjun Commandery in Qidong. Brother to Lu Yizhi and one of the current Four Great Generals, known as “Beacon-Smoke and Rising Sand.”

LU PINGYAN (“PACIFY BEACON SMOKE”): Lu Guangbai’s father and one of the past Four Great Generals of the Zhou empire.

QI SHIYU (“TIMELY RAIN”): Qi Zhuyin’s father and one of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou.

QI WEI : Deputy General to Qi Zhuyin.

QI ZHUYIN (“SOUND OF BAMBOO”): Grand marshal of the Qidong Garrison Troops. One of the current Four Great Generals, Qi Zhuyin is known as “Windstorm through the Scorching Plains” and commands all five garrisons in the commanderies of Qidong. Her weapon’s name is Banisher.

ZHONGBO

CUIQING : Procuress of a brothel who also sold girls to King Yi and Lei Changming.

DING TAO : Young guard to Xiao Chiye. He carries a little notebook everywhere he goes.

FEI SHENG : Son of common birth in the Fei Clan. Once an assistant commander in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, now a leader of Shen Zechuan’s personal guards.

GAO ZHONGXIONG : Courtesy name Shenwei. Former student of the Imperial College; currently works for Shen Zechuan in Cizhou.

HAERIGU : A Scorpion who defected from Gedal.

HUO LINGYUN : Eldest lawful son of Huo Qing, the former commander of the Dengzhou Garrison Troops.

JI GANG : Shen Zechuan’s shifu. Once the vice commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he is one of the three adopted sons of Ji Wufan, the former chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

KING YI OF FANZHOU : A commoner who rose in rebellion and proclaimed himself king.

KONG LING : Courtesy name Chengfeng. Chief advisor to Zhou Gui, prefect of Cizhou.

LEI CHANGMING : A bandit chief in Zhongbo. His base was Mount Luo.

LEI JINGZHE : A bandit of Mount Luo. The eldest common son of Lei Changming’s sister and Zhu Jie, the commander of the Duanzhou Garrison Troops during the reign of Yongyi.

LI XIONG (“BEAR”): A youth who was taken in and raised by Lei Jingzhe.

LIU’ER : Bandit who worked under Lei Jingzhe.

LUO MU : Courtesy name Mengzheng. The prefect of Chazhou. He and Kong Ling were students together.

QIAO TIANYA (“EDGE OF THE WORLD”): Previously named Qiao Songyue. The former judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he now takes Shen Zechuan as his master.

WANG XIAN : Once the Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue, who was later transferred to Zhongbo.

YAN HERU : The youngest young master of the prodigious merchant Yan Clan of Hezhou.

YANG QIU : Bandit chief from Dengzhou working under King Yi.

YAO WENYU ("GENTLE JADE"): Courtesy name Yuanzhuo. Hai Liangyi's only acknowledged pupil, said to be an extraordinary talent. After being poisoned by Xue Xiuzhuo, he traveled to Cizhou, where he became Shen Zechuan's strategist.

YIN CHANG : Commander of the Cizhou Garrison Troops.

YU XIAOZAI : Courtesy name Youjing. Previously the Investigating Censor in the Chief Surveillance Bureau, he left Qudu after losing his position and joined Shen Zechuan in Cizhou.

ZHOU GUI : The prefect of Cizhou.

BIANSHA

ACHI : The leader of the Black Scorpions who succeeded Haerigu.

AMUR : The Great Hero hailing from the Liaoying tribe who went on to become Libei's archenemy.

BAYIM : Huhelu's deputy general, transferred to Hassen after Huhelu's death.

DORLAN : Hassen's wife, a young lady from the Hulu tribe.

HUHELU : From the Changjiu Tribe. Amur's adopted son and a capable general, deceased.

HASSEN : Son of Amur. His mother holds a high status in the Hanma tribe. Has striking red hair.

JIDA : One of the Scorpions.

SUMONG : Commanding general of the Qingshu tribe. One of Hassen's deputy generals.

PAST

BAI CHA ("WHITE TEA"): Shen Zechuan's mother. A dancer from Duanzhou.

FENG YISHENG : One of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou. Adopted father to Zuo Qianqiu.

GUANGCHENG EMPEROR : Father to Li Jianheng and Li Jianyun, husband to Hua Hewei, the current empress dowager. His reign is titled the "Yongyi" years.

HUA PINGTING : Wife of Ji Gang and mother of Ji Mu; Shen Zechuan's shiniang. She was born in the Hua Clan.

JI MU : The only son of Ji Gang and Hua Pingting, and Shen Zechuan's adoptive elder brother.

SHEN WEI ("DEFENSE"): Prince of Jianxing and Shen Zechuan's father. Found guilty of colluding with the Biansha Horsemen to invade Zhongbo, he allegedly self-immolated to evade justice.

SHAO CHENGBI : Former Vice Minister of the Ministry of War.

TANTAI LONG : Tantai Hu's deceased older brother. Was the commander of the Dunzhou Garrison Troops before his death.

Institutions

THE EMBROIDERED UNIFORM GUARD

The Embroidered Uniform Guard, sometimes referred to as the Scarlet Cavalry, are the elite bodyguards who report directly to the emperor. They are a non-military secret police and investigative force. The Embroidered Uniform Guard is organized into the Twelve Offices, which include the Carriage Office, Umbrella Office, Elephant-Training Office, and Horse-Training Office, among others. The Xiuchun saber, a single-edged blade, is their signature weapon.

THE IMPERIAL ARMY

The Imperial Army of Qudu was once the Imperial Guard of the eight cities and the impregnable fortress of the imperial palace in Qudu. However, with the rise to power of the Eight Great Battalions, their duties were reduced significantly, and the Imperial Army became a dumping ground for sons from old military households. They are one of the two major military powers in Qudu.

THE EIGHT GREAT BATTALIONS

Led by a member of the Eight Great Clans, the Eight Great Battalions are one of the two major military powers in Qudu, tasked with patrolling and defending Qudu against external forces. Responsible for defending Qudu, the capital city and heart of the Zhou empire, the Eight Great Battalions hold the empire’s life in their hands.

THE EIGHT GREAT CLANS

The Eight Great Clans originated from the Eight Cities of Qudu. One clan holds sway in each city—the Xue Clan of Quancheng, Pan Clan of Dancheng, Xi Clan of Chuncheng, Fei Clan of Chuancheng, Hua Clan of Dicheng, Yao Clan of Jincheng, Han Clan of Wucheng, and Wei Clan of Cuocheng.

THE GRAND SECRETARIAT

The most distinguished and influential body in the central government, it is staffed with Grand Secretaries who are responsible for handling the emperor's paperwork, recommending decisions in response to memorials received from the officials, and drafting and issuing imperial pronouncements.

THE SIX MINISTRIES

The Six Ministries comprise the primary administrative structure of the Zhou empire's central government and include the Ministry of Works, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Rites, Ministry of Revenue, and Ministry of War. Coordinated by the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat, the heads of these ministries report directly to the emperor.

The Six Offices of Scrutiny is an independent agency set up to inspect and supervise the Six Ministries. It includes the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue.

CHIEF SURVEILLANCE BUREAU

Also known as the Censorate. One of the major agencies of the central government, responsible for maintaining disciplinary surveillance, auditing fiscal accounts, checking judicial records, carrying out inspections, impeaching officials for misconduct, recommending new policies and changes in old policies, and other duties involved in regulating government actions.

THE COURT OF JUDICIAL REVIEW

An important central government agency responsible for reviewing reports of judicial proceedings, making recommendations for retrials, and participating in important judicial proceedings at court alongside the Chief Surveillance Bureau and the Ministry of Justice, which are collectively known as the Three Judicial Offices.

THE LIBEI ARMORED CAVALRY

The Libei Armored Cavalry is a heavy cavalry established by Xiao Fangxu to counter external foes at the northern front during the Yongyi era, when the Biansha Horsemen repeatedly assaulted Luoxia Pass. Currently commanded by Xiao Jiming, the Heir of Libei.

THE QIDONG GARRISON TROOPS

Under the command of Qi Zhuyin, the Qidong Commandery Garrison Troops are stationed across five commanderies. They watch over the Qidong territories in the southern regions of the Zhou empire, which are led by the Qi Clan.

THE BIANSHA HORSEMEN

The Biansha Horsemen are the aggressor forces against the empire of Zhou. The story begins with the aftermath of the war, where the Biansha Horsemen ravaged the six prefectures of Zhongbo and left them piled high with bodies. Also referred to in derogatory form as the “Biansha baldies.”

THE TWENTY-FOUR YAMEN

Collectively refers to the Twelve Directorates, Four Offices, and Eight Services under which eunuchs serve.

Names Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

COURTESY NAMES VS GIVEN NAMES

Usually made up of two characters, a courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one’s crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one’s peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written

communication. Use of one's given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in historically inspired media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

DIMINUTIVES, NICKNAMES, AND NAME TAGS

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

XIAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning "little."

-ER: An affectionate diminutive suffix added to names, literally "son" or "child." Not to be confused with Xiao Chiye's nickname, Xiao Er, in which "er" ( ) means "second."

-LANG: A suffix meaning young man. A term of address often used toward one's lover or husband.

LAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning "old."

-ZI: Affectionate suffix meaning "son" or "child."

-XIONG: A word meaning elder brother. It can be attached as a suffix to address an older male peer.

FAMILY

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE/DAGE: Older brother or an older male friend.

JIE/JIEJIE: Older sister or an older female friend.

MARTIAL ARTS AND TUTELAGE

SHIFU: Teacher or master, usually used when referring to the martial arts.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHINIANG: The wife of one's shifu.

XIANSHENG: Teacher of academics.

OTHER

-GONGGONG: Term of address for a eunuch.

GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

-JUN: An address meaning "lord"

SHIZI: Title for the heir apparent of a feudal prince.

-YE: An address meaning "master."

LAO-ZUZONG: Literally "old ancestor," an intimate and respectful term of address from a junior eunuch to a more senior eunuch.

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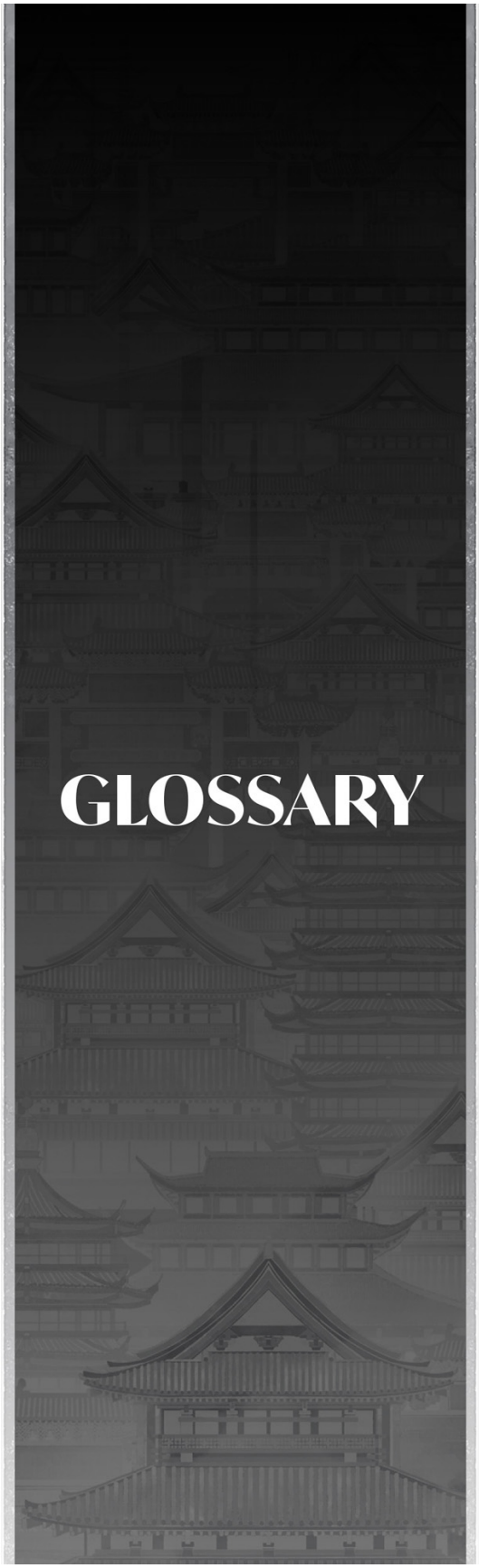
GLOSSARY

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Glossary

CALENDARS: The traditional Chinese calendar is a combination of the lunar and solar calendars. Like the Gregorian calendar, one year also contains twelve months with twenty-nine to thirty days per month, but respective dates do not line up with the Gregorian calendar. In general, the first through third months are considered spring, the fourth through sixth months are summer, the seventh through ninth months are autumn, and the tenth through twelfth months are winter. New Year's Day, which is the first day of the first month on the traditional Chinese calendar, typically falls on a day between late February and early March on the Gregorian calendar.

CONCUBINES AND THE IMPERIAL HAREM: In Imperial China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to take women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status; hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

The imperial harem had its own ranking system. The exact details vary over the course of history, but can generally be divided into three overarching ranks: the empress, consorts, and concubines. The status of a prince or princess's mother is an important factor in their status in the imperial family, in addition to birth order and their own personal merits. Given the patrilineal rules of succession, the birth of a son could also elevate the mother's status.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATION SYSTEM: The system of examinations in Imperial China that qualified someone for official service. It was intended to be a meritocratic system that allowed common civilians to rise up in society as a countering force to the nobility, but the extent to which this was true varied across time.

The imperial examination system was split into various levels. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, these were the provincial exam, metropolitan exam, and the palace exam. The top scholars at each examination level were known as the Jieyuan, Huiyuan, and Zhuangyuan respectively, and a scholar who emerged top at all three levels was known as the Sanyuan, or Triple Yuan, scholar.

LAWFUL AND COMMON BIRTH HIERARCHY: Upper-class men in Imperial China often took multiple wives. Only one would be the official wife, and her lawful sons would take precedence over the common sons of the concubines. Sons of lawful birth were prioritized in matters of inheritance. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the other common sons born to concubines or mistresses.

MANDARIN SQUARES: Large embroidered badges worn by civil officials of the imperial court. Depending on their pattern, which might incorporate real or mythical animals, flowers, and other symbols, these badges could indicate either the rank of the wearer, the season, or the occasion on which the badge was worn.

MANDATE OF HEAVEN: The Mandate of Heaven is the approval of heaven that justifies and legitimizes the rule of the emperor, also known as the Son of Heaven, over the people. If the emperor is not a virtuous ruler and fails to fulfill his obligations, then he would lose the mandate and the right to govern. Signs of a loss of mandate include societal unrest and uprisings, foreign invasions, natural disasters, and similar calamities.

NEW YEAR AND SPRING FESTIVAL: The Spring Festival marks the start of the new year on the traditional Chinese calendar. Yuanchun, also known as Yuandan, is the first day of the traditional new year, but new year celebrations usually start on the 23rd day of the twelfth month and last until the Lantern Festival, which falls on the 15th day of the new year. For the common people, this is an annual opportunity to gather with loved ones, indulge in meat that is normally too expensive for their tables, and put on new clothes.

OFFICIALS: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. Referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official, was the traditional path to becoming a court official. Another path, which later gained popularity as a way of combatting corruption and political cliques, was going through the imperial examination.

OFFICIALS OF COMMON BACKGROUNDS: Despite coming from affluent, possibly landowning, families, these officials were said to be from “common

backgrounds” because they were the first court officials in their family. This is in direct contrast to the noble officials, who consolidated their power over time by forming a familial network with other officials and using their influence to raise their younger generations to officialdom.

UNITS OF MEASUREMENT:

li **( )**: A traditional unit of length equal to approximately 500 meters or 1,640 feet.

chi **( )**: A traditional unit of length equal to approximately 13 inches.

dan **( )**: A dry measure for grain equal to approximately 100 liters.

dou **( )**: A dry measure for grain equal to one-tenth of a dan.

YAMEN: An administrative office or department, or residence of a government official. For example, that of a local district magistrate or prefectural prefect. This is not the same as the Twenty-Four Yamen run by the eunuchs.

YELLOW REGISTER: In the Ming and Qing dynasties, households were classified and recorded into the Huangce ( ) or yellow registers according to their occupations, which remained unchanged from one generation to the next. These records provided information for taxation, as well as corvée and military conscription. Households were mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and trades, with civilians further divided into subcategories like scholars, farmers, or builders. Apart from the “good civilians” or , there

also existed a permanent underclass of slaves or , who were born into their class or relegated as punishment for crime.

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About the Author

Tang Jiu Qing is an internationally renowned author who writes for the novel serialization website JJWXC. She started the web serialization of *Ballad of Sword and Wine: Qiang Jin Jiu*, in 2018. Her published works include *Nan Chan* and *Time Limited Hunt*, among others.

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Footnotes

Chapter 205: Duanzhou

[1] Final lines from the poem Beyond the Frontier by Xu Xilin, a Chinese revolutionary born near the end of the Qing dynasty.

Chapter 209: Embrace

[2] By the famous Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Chapter 214: Commander

[3] The first half of a couplet by Qing politician Lin Zexu (1785–1850).

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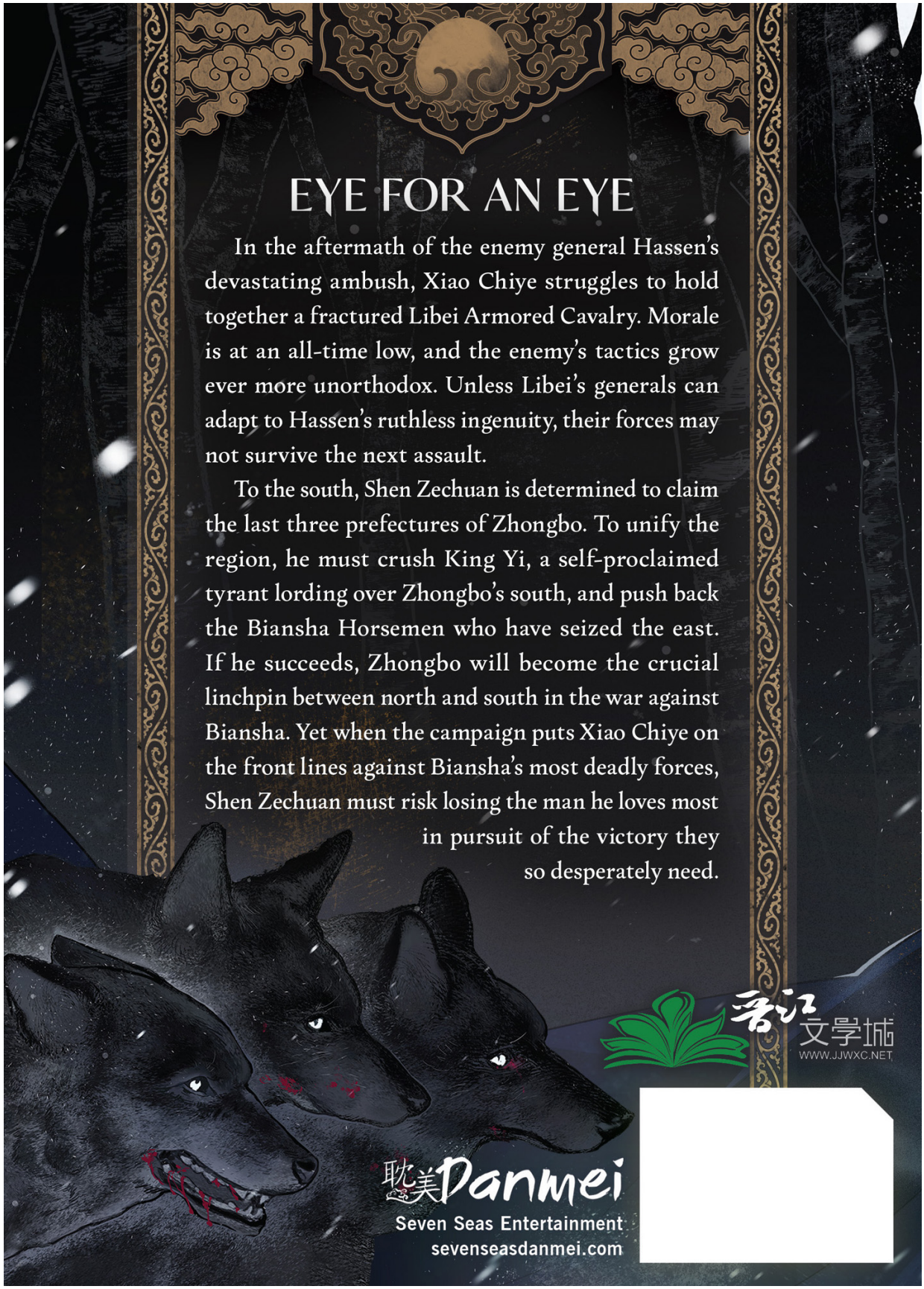
EYE FOR AN EYE
In the aftermath of the enemy general Hassen's devastating ambush, Xiao Chiye struggles to hold together a fractured Libei Armored Cavalry. Morale is at an all-time low, and the enemy's tactics grow ever more unorthodox. Unless Libei's generals can adapt to Hassen's ruthless ingenuity, their forces may not survive the next assault.
To the south, Shen Zechuan is determined to claim the last three prefectures of Zhongbo. To unify the region, he must crush King Yi, a self-proclaimed tyrant lording over Zhongbo's south, and push back the Biansha Horsemen who have seized the east. If he succeeds, Zhongbo will become the crucial linchpin between north and south in the war against Biansha. Yet when the campaign puts Xiao Chiye on the front lines against Biansha's most deadly forces, Shen Zechuan must risk losing the man he loves most in pursuit of the victory they so desperately need.
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